The immigrant's new home represents success and hope—doesn't it?

One winter morning I put my jacket on and went outside to shovel the snow, but it was so cold I had to go back into the house. I made some tea, hoping that it would make me feel warm, but it did not work. I walked through the house, down to the basement and up again. It did not help. I walked faster and faster until I was almost running, but that did not help either.

And then, while I was racing down the stairs to the basement, I remembered my mother. I have not thought of her for years and now, all of a sudden, while I was almost flying down the stairs, I could think of nothing else. In my mind’s eye I saw her standing in the corner, near the window. She turned to me and said that I should go outside. I replied that I’d rather stay at home. But why? she exclaimed. If a house were a good thing, the wolf would have one.

I’ve heard that saying before. It was one of hundreds she knew. Nothing could surprise her: good news, bad news, births, marriages, graduations, divorces, deaths—whatever happened, she would produce a saying that was perfect for the occasion.

But why did she want me to go out into the freezing cold? And why did she speak against having a house? Wasn’t she the one who adored our old apartment in Zemun, and kept it clean and tidy as long as she could? Mother, I wanted to ask her, isn’t buying a house every immigrant’s dream? The house is the proof of success for family members back home, and it also represents the new owners’ hope that now they’ll feel they belong here.

Soon after that, as I waited at the Calgary airport for my flight to Frankfurt, the man sitting next to me said, “I hate planes.” He then told me, or rather he whispered, as if he were telling me a secret, “and I am afraid of flying, but I have no choice. I cannot swim across the ocean, can I?”

He spoke with a recognizable Russian accent. It sounded almost like my Serbian accent, and when I spoke, he gave me a big hug as if I were his best friend. “I knew,” he said, “that you’re one of us!”

I didn’t know what he meant. “One of us,” he repeated. “You know, Slavs, Eastern Europeans, who
“How did you know?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I didn’t. I saw you coming this way, sitting down on this chair, and something inside me told me that you’re one of us.” He looked into my eyes. “You don’t believe me, do you?”

“I don’t know you,” I told him. “Why would I believe you?”

“But we’re brothers,” he said, “and not only because we’re Slavs. We’re also immigrant brothers. You, just like me, have two hearts.”

I touched my chest. There was only one heart beating in there, I was sure. “No two hearts in this body, buddy,” I told him.

“Oh, yes,” he said, “there are two of them. You know that saying—home is where the heart is? You know it, I’m sure.”

“I do,” I said. “Everybody does.”

“And that’s why immigrants have two hearts,” he said with a note of triumph in his voice. “They have two homes. A new one in Canada and an old one somewhere else in the world. Mine is in Moscow, and where’s yours?”

“In Belgrade,” I told him.

“You see,” he said, “and why didn’t you sell it when you moved to Canada?”

“How could I?” I answered. “It’s my home.”

A female voice invited passengers to board the plane. Afraid that the man might try to sit next to me, I did not wait for him. I got up and joined the line of people who held their boarding passes, then found my seat, sat down, opened a magazine and hid behind it.

Slowly I became aware that something was happening inside me. I touched my chest again and this time I could feel my second heart, beating like mad. So, Mother, I whispered, what should I do with two hearts, two homes and one wolf? But she did not say anything. I tried again; there was no reply. Instead, a voice asked me who I was talking to.

I put my magazine down and saw an old woman sitting next to me.

“I’m just trying to talk to my mother,” I said.

“Oh, dear,” the old woman said. “Where is she?”

“She’s up there.”

“Where, in first class?”

“No,” I said, “up there,” and I looked up at the ceiling.

The old woman looked up as well. The plane began to move faster and faster, and we just sat there, watching the ceiling as if my mother, or perhaps a wolf, were to appear at that spot any moment now, soon.
Aha, said the shuttle driver, Croatia, Yugoslavia, Bosnia, Serbia, Tito

On a recent trip to Paris, I met a young woman from Japan. But this is not a story about a sudden love affair, which one might expect in Paris. I met her on the last day of my short stay there. It was her last day too, and we both took the early shuttle to Charles de Gaulle Airport. She sat down next to me, introduced herself and said that she worked for the advertising department of a television station in Tokyo. I said that I was a writer and that I liked some of Haruki Murakami’s books. She knew the name but had not read any of his work. She knew, however, that a movie based on one of his books was being shot somewhere in Japan. The name of the movie, she said, had something to do with Norway. Norwegian Wood, I said.

She looked at me and asked, How did you know? Are you from Norway?

No, I said, but I know the song. It is by the Beatles.

I know the Beatles, said the young woman, but they are from England. And where are you from?

I hesitated for a moment before I said, Calgary, Canada. I decided not to mention the war in the former Yugoslavia, my homeland—it would only puzzle her. (It still puzzles me, although I lived there for many years.) Canada is a nice country, she said.

Maybe you can tell me, I said, why so many Japanese people go to Banff, in the Canadian Rockies.

Canadian Rockies are beautiful, she said. We learn about them in our school.

It’s great, I went on, that so many people from Japan visit Banff, but it’s a pity most of them never go to Calgary.

What is in Calgary? she wanted to know. What do you have?

We have Stampede, I replied, and when she gave me a blank look, I asked her whether she knew anything about cowboys. She said that she loved cowboys. She especially liked John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. They are from America, she added, and then she asked, Do they have Stampede in America?
Now, how do you explain what Stampede is? *Stampede*, I finally said, is a word that describes a sudden run of a large number of horses or any other animals. She nodded, so I went on and told her that there are many things to see and do during the ten days of the Calgary Stampede. She looked at me with her eyes wide open and said, And all this time the animals are running?

At first I did not know what she meant, because I could not follow her perfect reasoning. What do you mean? I asked. Stampede is running, she answered. Stampede is running all the time, no? There was a sly smile on her face as if she had just attained a satori and understood the meaning of it all. She turned around. In Calgary, she said to the passengers sitting behind us, Stampede is running all the time. She pointed at me and said, He is from Calgary. Good for him, said a man who was from Salt Lake City. The couple sitting next to him said that they were from Hungary. Then the shuttle stopped in front of a small hotel to pick up two women with enormous bags. The driver, who was from India, helped them put their bags into the shuttle and asked them what terminal they were going to. They did not know, so he asked them what city and country they were flying to. Zagreb, said the younger one. Croatia, said the older one. But the driver still did not know which terminal. The younger woman said to the older woman, in Croatian, The whole world knows about Zagreb except for this lunatic. The older woman told her to shut up and explained to the driver, in English: Zagreb, in Croatia. Croatia, you know—in Yugoslavia. Aha, said the driver. Croatia, Yugoslavia, Bosnia, Serbia, Tito. It is Terminal 2.

What an absurd paradox, I thought. You fight in a bloody civil war because there are people who do not like what Yugoslavia stands for and want to get rid of that name forever, and yet you are recognized only when you mention the name that should have been forgotten. History really likes to play games sometimes.

Then we were finally on our way to Charles de Gaulle Airport. It was early in the day and the streets were empty, so Paris looked a bit ghostly but still beautiful. The early morning light somehow made everything sharp like a precise architectural drawing. Travelling through that unpopulated, almost two-dimensional world made me think of writing a story about our group. In this harsh city landscape, it should be a science fiction story in which we are the last survivors of a terrible epidemic in Paris. We are on our way to board the last plane, left unattended on a runway, and we are lucky because one of us knows how to fly a plane—the man sitting behind me, who says, in my unwritten story, I am from Salt Lake City and if you want to live there, you’ve got to know something
about planes. I didn’t know whether that was true—I’ve never been to Salt Lake City—but I hoped that we would not end up like the survivors depicted on *The Raft of the Medusa*. I did not want to write a story with cannibals in it. Our plane, I thought, would take us safely all the way to Calgary, where the Stampede would be in full swing. We would be given white cowboy hats, and the young Japanese woman would be so happy to wear her hat and to dance with some real cowboys. Perhaps it should be a love story after all?

**Head Weight**

In all honesty, Ruben was at a loss to explain what was happening to him. He told his friends and family a story about feeling tired and drained, while he in himself saw a different sort of picture: somebody, who knows who, some huge and powerful being was squeezing him the way the last squirts of toothpaste are squeezed from a toothpaste tube. The crush of those huge fingers, the blunt thumb and the slightly angular index finger, produced so much pain at times in Ruben that, lying in bed, or mid-stride, he could barely hold back his screams. His life, he realized one morning, had become, over time, anticipation of pain, as if nothing else mattered and as if the pain had become a measure for all that shaped his life. His visits to doctors produced no tangible results, all his test results were fine, or, at the very worst, on the border, but never beyond it, over onto the other side.

"From a physiological perspective," a doctor told him, "your health may not be the best it has ever been, but close to it, at least as far as your body is concerned." He added, "You have nothing to worry about."

"What should I do, then," asked Ruben, "which direction should I take?"

The doctor touched his forehead in passing, as if embarrassed, then he touched his temple. "It may all be in the head," he said finally.

"In the head," said Ruben, surprised, "what do you mean?"

"Everything is in the head," answered the doctor, "though many fail to understand that."

Judging by the tone of his voice, suddenly tender as if he were speaking to a child,
Ruben realized the doctor meant him. He could, of course, have been offended—after all, it was as if the doctor were telling him he was crazy—but he didn't allow himself that. He smiled, shook the doctor's hand and went off to pay for the visit. While he was waiting for his receipt, the doctor appeared again and handed him a sheet of paper with the address and phone number of a woman, a colleague of his, whom, he said, he trusted completely.

Ruben looked at the sheet of paper only when he'd gotten home. The name Violeta Puhalo was written out in large letters. There was a phone number next to her name, but no address. Ruben crumpled it up and tossed it into the wastepaper basket which stood by his desk. Ten minutes later he pulled it out and smoothed it, then he stared for a long time at the name and number. He picked up the phone, set it back in the cradle, then picked it up again, and, without allowing himself to change his mind, started dialing the number.

The voice was different from everything he'd expected and that unpredictability made him immediately accept her suggestion that he come for an introductory session. "As soon," said the voice, "as possible." She had already spoken with her colleague, the voice went on to say, and he, her colleague, felt they should waste no time. The voice suggested they see each other Monday.

"I hate Mondays," answered Ruben.

"So much the better," said the voice, "that way we'll tear down a barrier right from Day One and open the pathway to each other."

Ruben pictured himself for a moment as a lone demonstrator, surrounded by a fence with various slogans. Would everything really get better once the fences and the obstacles were gone? He asked what time would be good, he wrote the address and phone number down, although the number was the same number he already had, but he stopped writing when she said her name.

The voice asked him if he had gotten everything down. "If you need," the voice said patiently, "I will repeat all of it again."

"Violeta," said Ruben, "is not such a common name."

The voice hesitated for a moment, and then added, in order not to lose rhythm: "What do you mean by that?"
"Exactly what I said," answered Ruben. "There aren't many women these days with that name.

"Does that mean," asked the voice, "that you already know a Violeta?"

Ruben could feel the voice grow surer. "I have known three Violetas," he said finally.

The voice, again, almost imperceptibly, lost rhythm. "Will you," said the voice, "tell me about them?"

"I already am," answered Ruben.

The voice stopped. Ruben pressed the receiver against his ear, but he heard nothing. Then he had the impression that he could hear someone breathing. "Hello," he said, "Violeta?"

"See you Monday," said the voice and hung up.

Monday began with a gloomy morning, sunless, everything had a uniform, colorless tone and seemed brittle and fragile. A real morning for hatred, thought Ruben as he stood by the window and scratched himself. He was scheduled to meet with Violeta at eleven, which meant he had plenty of time to take a shower, have a shave and get dressed, and even change his clothes if he didn't like what he had selected. He thought, also, that it was amusing that he was thinking of his meeting with her as if he were seeing a girl, and he assumed this was some sort of defense mechanism piping up inside him being as he was going off to see a psychiatrist. Ruben, actually, wasn't sure whether Violeta was a psychologist or a psychiatrist, but he sensed that this didn't make much difference, at least in his case. Like most people, he felt mistrust of these professions, because he believed that they could, as if they had some special kind of X-ray vision or scanner, see everything that was in his soul, and even things that no longer were in his soul. And not only what had been in his soul, but even what was to come, because if they didn't have the power to see future events, how would they have the knowledge to heal?

A glance at the door leading to Violeta's office was of no help, because her name was the only thing on the door. He touched his finger to her bell, then removed it,
checked what he'd put on to wear and ran his fingers over his clothes, checked that there wasn't a button wrongly buttoned, fixed the knot on his tie and chided himself for not wearing a hat. He looked over his shoes, then polished them on his trouser legs. Now he could ring the doorbell, and it responded with a cheery melodic ditty which Ruben recognized, but couldn't pin down. So as soon as the door started opening, he asked: "What is that melody your doorbell plays?"

The woman who came to the door had red hair and long fingernails, done in a clear, colorless fingernail polish. Without changing her broad grin, she repeated Ruben's question and, as if she didn't know what he meant, she rang the doorbell once more. The cheery melody filled the hallway. "I don't know," said the woman, "but I could look in the instructions, they probably say."

Ruben suddenly wondered whether the woman there in front of him was Violeta, with whom he had arranged to meet, but he didn't know how to bring it up. As if she heard his unasked question, the redhead woman put out her hand and said: "I am Violeta."

"Oh," said Ruben. He touched her hand and immediately let it go.

"I know," smiled Violeta, "you didn't expect me to look like this. The red hair confuses everyone." She moved a little to the side and invited him to come in. "There is no reason," she said, "for us to waste time." She looked at her wristwatch. "Another patient will be coming at noon."

"I am not a patient," said Ruben, but still he went into the anteroom. The door softly closed behind him, and for a moment, after the unusually bright lights in the building corridor, he found himself in a protective gloom. Violeta walked by him and the sleeve of her blouse brushed against the fabric of Ruben's jacket. She opened the door that led into her office and stepped directly in, without waiting for Ruben. He moved slowly, much more slowly than he meant to, and when he finally entered the office and shut the door, Violeta was already seated at the desk. Ruben looked around and with regret saw that the fabled couch was missing; instead, in the corner there were two armchairs, facing each other.

"Of course you're not a patient," said Violeta, "we will talk about that later." She gestured toward the armchairs. "Would you like us to sit there," she asked, "more comfortable for conversation?" She flipped opened a file that was on the table and peered into it. "Your doctor," she said, and touched her forehead and temple in passing, "thinks that the real solution to your complaints should not be sought in your body."
"I know," said Ruben.

"Do you agree with him?"

"I am not a doctor," answered Ruben

Violeta was persistent. "You needn't be a doctor," she said, "to have an opinion on your health."

Ruben said nothing.

Violeta repeated the invitation for them to sit in the armchairs, and then, as if to give him an example, she sat down first. Ruben hesitated a moment longer, then he joined her. He believed that when he sat down he would sink into the armchair, but it was surprisingly firm, and, he had to admit, quite comfortable.

"And now," said Violeta and crossed her legs, "you promised you'd tell me about the Violetas you have known."

"I fucked the first one standing up," said Ruben. He saw how Violeta's eyes widened although he saw no fear in them or a call for caution. To be perfectly frank, he surprised himself by his own words. He had never expressed himself so vulgarly before, especially in front of a person he didn't know, but now it was too late. He couldn't take back the words he had said, and anything further he could say would only worsen the already bad impression. He breathed in deeply and counted to ten before he breathed out.

"And," spoke up Violeta, "how was it?"

"Clumsy," said Ruben and laughed. His laughter was hollow and artificial, he could hear it himself, he didn't need a psychologist or a psychiatrist for that.

"I understand," said Violeta, "not the most comfortable pose, especially if there is a big difference in height."

"A stool," said Ruben.

"Sorry?"
"You need a stool," Ruben explained patiently.

"In other words," said Violeta, "you always need to have a stool handy."

"Yes," agreed Ruben, "a folding stool."

"And the third one," asked Violeta, "what happened with her?"

"You've skipped the second," said Ruben

"I did not," answered Violeta, "I'm saving her for later."

Ruben studied her face closely. He couldn't rid himself of the impression that she was toying with him, that she knew everything about him and was only pretending to ask him questions. How, for instance, had she known that the second Violeta in his life should be left for the end, since she, that second Violeta, had so made her mark on his heart that he sometimes wondered how he had survived at all? Of course, he cautioned himself, when one is talking with a psychiatrist or a psychologist, whatever she was, one doesn't speak of marks on the heart but of marks on the consciousness, about the structure of mechanisms of remembering and forgetting, of guilt and ridding oneself of guilt, about the unconscious and the subconscious. He could have gone on with the list, but he sensed this would change nothing. "The third," he said, finally, "was not important."

"Nothing is unimportant," countered Violeta. "Every part of our lives, at least at the initial level, has the same value. Nothing is purely good or bad in and of itself, meaningful or meaningless, instead we make it what it is.

Ruben couldn't take his eyes off her. He asked: "Are you sure that's so?"

Violeta lost her rhythm again. She waited a little longer than necessary, just a little, but enough so that Ruben concluded he was winning. And, of course, as soon as he thought that, he chided himself for seeing things that way. He hadn't come here to compete, he had come to learn something about himself, but what?

"I am sure," Violeta said finally.

Ruben no longer knew what her answer referred to, because he was still caught up in the dilemma of his competitive spirit. "The third Violeta," he spoke up suddenly, "has almost completely gone from my memory, I am no longer even
sure her name was Violeta."

"There's no reason for you to be angry," said Violeta, "and if you aren't enjoying this conversation, we can stop."

Ruben felt her moving past him and taking up the lead, but he could do nothing about it. This reminded him of dreams in which he watched helplessly while something horrible happened to him, but he was never able to warn himself. He'd open his mouth, widen his eyes, flail his arms, everything was futile: no voice came out of his throat, no warning rang through the air, he could only moan while he watched himself falling from a cliff or sinking into a fresh crack in the earth's crust. He never saw himself dead, not even from afar, and he believed that his consciousness was protecting him that way from the unpleasant site of mangled corpses. He looked at Violeta and asked: "Why is it that we never see ourselves dead in our dreams?"

Violeta returned his gaze and he could see that her eyes were more alive, interested, her whole face, in fact, shone, and she sat up in her chair, straightened her shoulders, patted her hair. "Whatever gave you that idea," she answered, "when that is not even so? Why," she went on, "just last night I dreamt that I was lying dead on the floor in the front room, while a man's voice could be heard from the other room, saying my name."

"From which other room," asked Ruben, "here or the kitchen?"

"Here," said Violeta.

"Why not the kitchen?"

"In the dream I knew that there was nobody in the kitchen."

"And now?"

"What now?"

"Do you now know," asked Ruben, "that there is nobody in the kitchen?"

A trace of insecurity flashed in Violeta's eyes for the first time. She wasn't afraid, that was also evident, but she no longer had enough self-confidence. Soon, Ruben thought, she will start looking longingly at the phone, and at that moment Violeta
started glancing over at her mobile phone, back on her desk. If she were to get up now and go over to it, she would be admitting she was afraid, and she, Ruben sensed, would never do that. He tried to judge how much farther he was from the phone than she was and he concluded that he probably could grab it before she did, especially if he lunged suddenly. Instead, he was surprised by Violeta's belated answer.

"I am sure," she said, her voice trembling a little, "that there is no one in the kitchen, but I am not sure why you mentioned your own dead body in the context of a conversation about the Violetas. Did something tragic happen to the second Violeta?"

"If something had happened to her," answered Ruben, "why would I dream my own dead body?"

"That is a switch that typically happens in dreams," said Violeta, "especially in a case when someone won't admit their guilt, and then the subconscious attributes the death to itself, or rather, it says: It would be better if I were dead, and that she, or he, or anybody, were alive."

"A dangerous thing this subconscious," smiled Ruben. He did not miss noticing that Violeta, pretending that she was getting more comfortable in the armchair, had moved an inch or so closer to the desk.

"The subconscious doesn't lie," said Violeta.

"I didn't say it lies," replied Ruben.

Silence reigned. Ruben stared unblinking at Violeta. He saw her touch her forehead, but then, instead of touching her temple, she dropped her finger to her nose. Again she crossed her legs and leaned even more toward the desk. Ruben knew that she knew that she mustn't stop talking, but nothing was coming to mind to talk about, or, more likely, nothing that came to mind gave her any sense of security. Then she mustered her courage. This was evident by the way she quickly licked her lips and brushed the hair away from her face.

"You killed her," said Violeta, "isn't that so?"

Ruben finally took his eyes off her and looked down at his hands.
"No," Violeta nearly screamed.

"What?"

"You strangled her, didn't you?"

"Never," said Ruben and stopped talking.

"What?"

"I would never do that," Ruben said through clenched teeth.

"I can't say why," said Violeta, "but I do not believe you."

Now she was poised to stand. Her legs were no longer crossed and she was leaning with one hand on the edge of the seat. Always that hope, thought Ruben, that fate can be changed, that it is possible to win a race you are doomed to lose. Her wrist, almost white from the pressure, was so slender he could have snapped it like a twig. He could hear Violeta’s bone snap as clear as a bell, at once both sharp and dull. But she heard it, too, and not just once, but twice. Her body abruptly relaxed, the shadows cleared from her face, her hand rose from the seat edge.

"What was that," asked Ruben, "did something happen?"

"The cleaning lady," answered Violeta nearly triumphant, "the cleaning lady came in."

And sure enough, there were sounds of the door opening and closing, of someone walking, hesitating, moving some things, and then the sounds disappeared and it was quiet again.

"How do you know," said Ruben, "that was her?"

"I know," said Violeta, rising suddenly, grabbing her mobile phone and, without a break in her movement, striding to the door of the doctor's office, she opened it, stepped out and quickly closed it behind her. He soon heard her speaking to someone, then the person replied, then there was a brief silence, then someone's steps slowly, cautiously, neared the door of the office, a key jangled as it slid into the lock and then turned twice. The steps moved away, followed by hushed whispering, and then there was nothing else to be heard.
Ruben did not move the entire time. He knew that Violeta was now calling the police, he could imagine what she would say, how she would urge them to hurry, because, who knows, she was telling them, what he is prepared to do, she could see by his behavior that he was crazy, that he was obsessed, and after all he had all but confessed that he killed a woman whose name was the same as hers, perhaps he is obsessed by the name, no, the person is no relation of hers, she has no idea who the person is, but hurry please, and we, the cleaning lady and I, no, her name is not Violeta, she just happened in and has nothing to do with the man, in any case we will go out and wait for you by the front entrance.

Ruben got up and went to the window. He opened it wide, leaned out and looked down. The office was on the third floor, and if he found no better solution, he would be able to jump to the roof of the kiosk that was in front of the building and reached up to the second floor. He turned and surveyed the office, then he went to the desk and looked into the file that had his name written on it. The file was empty. He looked under it, peered under the desk, but found nothing. He looked around and saw his own face in a small, framed mirror. He didn't know how he had gotten there. Maybe he should take the mirror down from the wall, remove it from its frame and free himself that way? He turned toward the wall, heard the front door slam, he flinched and hurried over to the window. He stood with his left foot on the sill, then his right. He imagined Violeta's startled expression when she saw him at the entrance to the building and he smiled. His muscles tightened, especially his stomach muscles, but then he realized he'd never dare to jump. He tried again, but his thighs wobbled, his hands went limp, his knees went all soft and shaky, he had to sit down. Above him, he noticed when he looked up, stretched a perfectly empty sky. He had never seen anything so simple and so beautiful. He swung his legs back and forth, whistled a tune from his boyhood days, and while the sound of the police siren grew louder, he tipped forward until he felt himself losing his balance, the weight of his head was drawing him down. He closed his eyes and tipped his head forward a little more, ever so little, but far enough.

more: http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/head-weight#ixzz2iJ97vMO7
Learning Cyrillic

1. I leave the church at nine sharp. Outside it is a clear, winter night, the church steps are slippery, the cold air slices my breath. I move slowly; I grab for the frozen shrubbery. Next time, I say to myself, wear high-topped shoes. Then I spot the Indian. He is standing by a round traffic sign. He has on a leather jacket with long fringes, and he is wearing boots decorated with Indian symbols. As I am walking by him, I see his eyes are closed. "Hey," says the Indian, "what's the rush?"

2. Fridays I go to church. I do not go to pray; I hold classes in the Serbian language for the children of emigrants. The class starts at 7 p.m. for the little ones aged six to nine. It ends at quarter to eight, and the class for children between nine and sixteen begins at eight. There are no sixteen-year-olds among these kids; the oldest is a thirteen-year-old boy. There are twenty boys and girls in the first group; in the second the most I ever get are seven or eight students, but only three come regularly. One six-year-old boy stays on for the older class because his sister is in it. She, however, never comes to the class for the little ones, though their parents probably drop them off together at 7 p.m. The children in the first group like singing, while the children in the second group don't like anything. I think they hate me; I do my best to avoid looking at them.

3. A week later, right at nine, the Indian is standing in the same place. He has on that same leather jacket with the long fringes, but this time he is wearing sneakers. And his eyes aren't closed: they gleam as he watches me walk toward him. Passing by him, I slip, stagger, and barely regain my balance. The Indian says nothing. When I turn to look back a bit later, he is still standing there. He could do with a hat, I think. The Indian raises his arm and waves.

4. The little ones are working at their Cyrillic. I print the letters out on a smooth whiteboard with a wide, blue, felt-tip pen. Then I dictate short sentences for the practice of Cyrillic: "Лела љуља Љиљану: Lela rocks Ljiljana. Ђак носи џак: The pupil carries a sack. And Ћира има чир: Ira has an ulcer." The children lick their lips while their pencils follow the curves of the letters. There are reproductions behind them along the whole wall of frescoes from Serbian monasteries. I count the ones where I have been, and then the ones I have never seen. I believe I saw a peacock at Ravanica, but I am not sure.

5. During recess, while I am sipping some water in the kitchenette, I ask the priest about the peacocks. He had seen them somewhere, too, he says, but he doesn't know where. And anyway, he says, he doesn't think much of peacocks. Such a
pretty bird, he adds, and such a squawking call. I try to remember the call of the peacock, but I can't pin it down. The priest asks whether I know that the peacock's tail, all those gaudy feathers, is not in fact its tail, but a kind of decorative mask with which the peacock conceals its real tail. I know nothing about peacocks, so I shrug. "The peacock does not like living alone," says the priest. "If its mate dies, the male flies away." "Where to?" I ask. "Somewhere it will be loved," says the priest.

6. You have to take a zigzag path from the church to my house. When you leave the church and pass by the round traffic sign, then you should turn right, then left onto the first street, and then take the second right, and then again onto the first left. It takes about ten minutes to walk directly. The Indian is not standing in his place, but when I turn left, I have a sense that I can see him out of the corner of my eye. I turn. He's not there. I keep walking, now certain he's following me. I imagine moccasins on his feet, then I stop, crouch, pretend to tie my shoe, and snatch a glance over my shoulder. The street is empty. The yellow light on the stop light is blinking. When I stand back up, I feel lightheaded. I turn right, then left, I speed up as I walk and turn to look back more and more often. There is no one there. I enter the house, out of breath, lean pressing back against the door, flick on the light, cough. The parakeet watches me from its cage in the corner.

7. The next Friday, the priest stops me at the door out of the church. He says he'd remembered where he had seen peacocks. "Where?" I ask. "At a zoo," says the priest, but then he immediately adds that he doesn't know which city the zoo was in. All he can remember is that none of the peacocks-and there were at least three males with a dozen females-wanted to stop and spread its tail. "We hopped around by the railing," says the priest, "flapped our arms, shouted all sorts of nonsense, yet none of it helped. A few of them squawked is all," continues the priest, "and that call was so raucous that we doubled over laughing." "Who is we?" I ask. The priest turns to the left and to the right. "Best not to get into that now," says the priest and straight off asks me whether I am pleased with how the kids are doing. I answer in the affirmative, but I complain of the shortage of books and primers, and just at that moment some members of the church's school council appear and the priest invites them to join us. Word by word, agreement by agreement, promise by promise, I only leave the church at about 9:30. The Indian is standing next to the round traffic sign, rubbing his hands. "You were in such a rush last time," he says as I walk by him, "and now you are late: when will you make your mind up?" I take a few more steps, and then stop. I don't turn around. I am not far from him: I can hear him breathe. When the breathing stops, I keep going, across the street, between the parked cars, all the way to my house.

8. While I am sitting in a restaurant, drinking coffee with milk, the Indian stands
on the sidewalk across the street. Later, when I go to the supermarket, I see him over by the fruit and vegetable counter. While I stand in line at the bank, he sits in an armchair and studies the instructions for taking out a loan. At the playground, where boys and girls are chasing after a soccer ball in the snow, I don't see him at first. Later I notice him: he is crouching behind the shrubbery.

9. The priest comes into the room where I am holding class. The boys and girls look up from their books. The priest comes over to my desk, leans toward me and whispers in my ear. His breath is warm and smells of mint. I get up and leave with him. I stand at the door and tell the children to behave themselves. The children acquiesce, they nod, but I know they know I don't trust them. I close the door and hurry after the priest, I am almost running as I enter his office. The priest is standing by the window. He beckons to me, and when I am right next to him, I see where he is looking. The Indian is standing on the path leading to the church. He is dressed in his ceremonial gear with all sorts of fringe and gaudy baubles, he is wearing moccasins, and he has an eagle feather and bison horn headdress. "I asked him what he is doing here," says the priest. "And what did he say?" I ask. "He is waiting for an answer," says the priest. "From whom?" I ask. The priest shrugs. "Maybe he meant the church," I say, "or God?" "I already asked him that," says the priest. "So what did he say?" I ask. "Nothing," says the priest. Both of us look out the window a bit longer. The Indian does not move. Children's voices can be heard far off, giggling and shrieking. I tell the priest to see to the children, and then I go out. My eyes smart from the cold. "It's time," says the Indian when I go over to him. He puts out his closed hand to me, then he opens it slowly. I don't see anything in his hand, but I know what is there. The Indian turns and leaves, and I go back to the church. I find the priest sitting on the desk, reading the children a poem by the poet Uncle Jova Zmaj. One of the little girls has put her head down on her desk and fallen asleep. When the priest turns the page, she opens her eyes.

10. I am not surprised when I see the Indian waiting for me out in front of my house. The day is bright, sunny, and the cold air only nips at the face. The Indian is a head taller than me. When he offers me his hand, my hand is swallowed by his fist.

11. We sit in the front room of the City Museum, near the door that leads to an exhibit dedicated to the Blackfoot tribe. "The Siksika," says the Indian, "not the Blackfeet." "White people talk about the Blackfeet," he adds, "but the real people speak only of the Siksika." "You are a Siksika?" I ask. The Indian says yes, he is. "Maybe now," I continue, "you can tell me your name." "Maybe," says the Indian; then he says nothing. After a while, just as the woman at the cash register yawns, the Indian says: "Thunder Cloud."
12. Thunder Cloud is patient. While I look at the paintings and objects, he leafs through the catalogue. Now and then he comes over and peers past my shoulder. When one of the captions gives a word in his language, he says it a few times. Then he urges me to say it, but when I finally do, he clicks his tongue and shakes his head.

13. "I saw you yesterday with the Indian," says a blond-haired boy. The other children stop writing. "I once had my picture taken with an Indian at a rodeo," says a little girl with her hair done up in pig tails. For a moment we all look at her. "The sun was so hot," says the little girl, "that I had to wear dark glasses." "His Indian," says the blond-haired boy, "is at least six feet tall." Now they are all looking at me. "Today we are going to read a new story," I say. I pick up a black, felt-tip pen and write at the top of the board: "The Dark Land."

14. The priest is vexed. Ever since the Indian has started standing in front of the church, women have been complaining and they say they fear for their safety. "Yesterday," says the priest, "Mrs. Vidosava was here, the one who has that fur coat, and she said she shakes from head to foot whenever she thinks of that Indian, and when she sees him, then her knees knock and her heart jumps to her throat. She showed me," says the priest, "how she shakes." The priest spreads his arms and legs, rolls back his eyes, sticks out his tongue, and shakes. "Something along those lines," he says when he stops, "though she is better at it than I am." "But," I reply, "Thunder Cloud is not dangerous. I am sure he'd never even trod on an ant. And besides," I add, "he has no interest in white women." The priest looks at me suspiciously and asks how I know. "I know," I say, "because he is a traditional Indian and the only thing that matters to him is preserving the purest possible legacy for his tribe." "What tribe?" asks the priest. "The Siksika," I say. "Who are they?" asks the priest. "They used to be called the Blackfeet," I say. "Didn't there used to be a comic strip," muses the priest, "back in Serbia, with Indians from that tribe?" I know nothing about a comic strip, so I keep my mouth shut. The priest scratches his neck and behind his ears. "First the Indians killed some newcomers and took their children into slavery," says the priest, "and then the English soldiers came, or was it the French, and killed all the Indians, but they didn't find the children... or did they find them after all? I don't remember," says the priest, "but one of the Indians was a Blackfoot, I'm sure of it."


16. It is cold, but the Indian is standing by the round traffic sign and he is not moving. "How much longer can he keep that up?" asks the priest. "Until morning,"
I answer. We are standing in front of the window, partially hidden by the curtain. We watch an elderly woman, short and wearing a hat, as she reaches the street corner. When she gets to the Indian, she stops and looks him up and down. Her eyes travel slowly, as if she wants to see, maybe even commit to memory, every single spangle, every shred of fringe, every bead and every feather. The Indian stands and doesn't breathe. "He has to breathe," says the priest. "There is no living being that can last with no oxygen." The woman says something and the Indian leans over the better to hear her. Then he flings back his head and laughs. He guffaws, everything reverberates, and the old woman taps her foot merrily all the while. White fluffy snow wafts up into the air.

17. There are only four children this evening in the second group, counting the six-year-old boy who is here with his older sister. None of them says anything, and since I'm not asking, we sit there, silent; various sounds reach us. The thumping from the floor below is from members of the folklore group practicing the steps for circle dances. A restrained murmur, somewhere from beneath our feet, comes from the banter of the parents who wait in the room by the bar for the kids working on their Serbian language and folkdances. Marica is at the bar, and on the board behind her is a list of all the available items: beer, hot brandy, juices and sandwiches. Unfortunately, there are no pastries. There are times when the parents regret that the lessons finish so soon, and that they can't stay longer, to have at least one more beer. I watch my little group and wonder who will be the first to speak. Then music can be heard downstairs, and then the thumping in search of the rhythm. I tap the rough surface of the table with my index finger. "I hate that music," says the girl to her little brother. My index finger freezes mid-air. Her brother giggles.

18. When we get closer to the panel with the large photograph of an Indian chief, Thunder Cloud says: "My great-grandfather." I look at the picture, I look at Thunder Cloud: those prominent, highly raised cheekbones are the same, that narrow, crooked nose, the deeply set lines that run from the nostrils to the corners of the mouth. It reads below the picture: An unknown Indian chief, the Siksika tribe, around 1860 (?). I draw Thunder Cloud's attention to the caption. Thunder Cloud snorts derisively. "If there's something a white man doesn't know," he says, "does that mean no one knows it?" "Absolutely not," I say. "Don't you think I'd know my own great-grandfather?" says Thunder Cloud. "Of course," I reply. "His name was Black Otter," says Thunder Cloud. "Black Otter," I repeat. "One night," continues Thunder Cloud, "he dreamed he was battling a group of Shoshones, and when he faced the fact that he would be unable to fend them off any more, he leaped into a river, where, instead of drowning, he turned into an otter. When he woke up, he was wet from head to toe. He left the tent and said to his mother: 'I am Black Otter.' 'Fine,' said his mother, 'but first get out of those wet clothes.' I
will draw an otter on our tent first,' he said, and then he sketched a black otter on the four sides of the tent, so it could protect them from every danger, no matter which direction the danger was coming from. Then he drew circles that were the stars in the night sky, a little cross that was a moth who brought good dreams, a wriggly line that was the hilly countryside where they lived. His mother waited patiently all that time, holding dry clothes. Black Otter put down the paint and changed his clothes, and a little later a photographer just happened to turn up."

"And this is the picture?" I ask. "This is it," says Thunder Cloud.

19. "And now," I say, as I finish reading the story, "any questions?" The girl with the pig tails raises her hand: "Why," she asks, "do they call the Indians Blackfeet?"

"Because they don't wash their feet," says the boy sitting in the front row. I wait for the giggles to subside, and then I say, "That's not used for all Indians, only for the ones who belong to the Blackfoot tribe, and in their language it's called 'Siksika,' and that's where they got the name. It was given to them because an ancestor of theirs had moccasins that turned black after he walked over land that had burned in a prairie fire." No one is listening any more.

20. Thunder Cloud and I are sitting together at a library. There is a pile of books in front of us about the Indians of North America. Thunder Cloud shows me a photograph of Crowfoot, the greatest chief of the Siksikas, and Crowfoot's family. In it we see Crowfoot, a woman, probably his wife, and eight children. The photograph was taken in 1884, the caption says, and over the next six years almost all of them died of tuberculosis and other diseases, including Crowfoot. I imagine all those plagues, all those fast and slow deaths, words sputtered in delirium, the loss of hope, the absence of comfort, the vast prairie that suddenly has no shelter to offer anymore. "You could mount the fastest horse and ride it until it dropped from exhaustion," says Thunder Cloud, "and still you couldn't outrun the sickness. And that," he says, "was the most awful plague the white man brought with him, that kind of killing both near and far, when he was there and even when he wasn't. We weren't afraid of death," says Thunder Cloud, "but what we meant by that was an honorable death, a death in battle or from wounds, or old age, when the body goes back to its maker, and now we had to face a kind of death that killed for the sake of killing, as if they liked it." Thunder Cloud stops talking, sets the palms of his hands on the table. Snow is falling outside.

21. "Who knows," says the priest, "what he believes in, and whether he believes in anything?" Thunder Cloud laughs when I translate the priest's question for him. He laughs for a long time, his head flung back, until tears come to his eyes. Then he asks the priest what the priest believes in. "In a community of freedom between God and man through Jesus Christ," says the priest. "What does that mean?" asks Thunder Cloud when I translate the priest's words for him. "A community of
freedom is a community of love," answers the priest, "because without love there can be no faith." Thunder Cloud considers this for a while. "So," he says, "you love in order to be free?" "No," says the priest, "first you have to become free, and only after that can you begin to love." "And before that," asks Thunder Cloud, "could it be that before that there is no love?" "Love is not an emotion," says the priest. "Love is community with someone else." "So that means," Thunder Cloud glowered over him, "that you can be with someone you don't love, but that it still counts as love?" The priest huffs. "I have a headache," he says. "Me, too," says Thunder Cloud. "I could do with a strong cup of coffee," says the priest. "Me, too," says Thunder Cloud. "Marica," calls the priest, "let us have two cups of Turkish coffee!"

22. Thunder Cloud sits in a chair and watches the kids. The kids watch Thunder Cloud. "What's this now?" I break the silence, "isn't there anyone with a question for our guest?" The girl with the pig tails raises her hand: "Does he know Serbian?" "He does not," I say. "He is an Indian." "Some Indians know Serbian," speaks up a boy who is sitting at the back of the room. "How do you know?" asks the boy sitting next to him. "My father said so," says the first boy. Thunder Cloud doesn't move. From where I'm standing, right by the door, it looks as if he isn't breathing at all. "Your father doesn't know from shit," says the other boy, "Indians speak only English." "They speak their own languages, too," I interrupt. Then I ask Thunder Cloud to say something in his language. Thunder Cloud says a short sentence in which the consonants and vowels follow in rapid succession. "What is he saying?" asks the girl from the first row. "I was telling," says Thunder Cloud, "how the moon and a wolf meet every summer night on a hill by Yellow River." "How do you say 'wolf'?" asks the little girl. "Makoiyi," says Thunder Cloud. "And 'moon'?" "Kokomikisomm," says Thunder Cloud. "And 'summer'?" "Niipo," says Thunder Cloud. The little girl with the pig tails raises her hand again: "May I ask him something in English?" I nod. The girl gets up, coughs, and asks: "Why do Indians live in those round, tall tents, and not in a house?" "Because," answers Thunder Cloud, "the devil can chase you into the corner of a house, but in our tent, which we call a tipi, there are no corners, so the devil stays away." "OK," says the little girl, and sits down. The parents start appearing at the door. "Practice your Cyrillic," I say to the kids. "Next week we'll have a test."

23. The jangling of the phone wakes me up in the middle of the night. I poke around on the bedside table, knock a book to the floor, the alarm clock flies after it, but I do manage to find the receiver and pull it to my ear. "I can't sleep," says the priest. "What's up?" I ask. "I don't know," says the priest, "maybe it's the full moon." I looked out the window: the moon is, indeed, full and is suspended above the city like a bloated squash. I ask the priest whether he has drawn the curtains. "I have," says the priest. Had he had a cup of mint tea? Yes, he had. Had he counted
sheep? Yes, but in vain. Had he tried thinking of nothing? "What do you mean, of nothing?" asks the priest. "You need to focus," I say, "and breathe carefully until your mind is all empty." "Is this Eastern heresy?" asks the priest. "That depends," I say. "Then it is," answers the priest, "and in that case I would rather stay awake." I shrug. "Good night," says the priest. "Good night."

24. We stop by a photograph of an Indian woman drying meat. "The dried meat was mixed with dried berries," says Thunder Cloud, bison fat was added to it, and this mixture, called mokimaani, was the staple during wintertime. Wrapped up in blankets, with kerchiefs tied around their heads, the Indian women did not look noble the way the men did. "You are wrong," says Thunder Cloud. "The women of the Blackfoot tribe were as powerful as the men. The tipi belonged to the woman," he says, "because the woman built it and kept it, and if she wanted to separate from the man she had been living with until then, all she had to do was to leave his things out in front, in a pile." "And what would he do then?" I ask. "He would look to find himself another woman," says Thunder Cloud, "and another tent." I imagine an Indian moving around among the tipis early in the morning. His arms are full of his things, some of them roll off and drop to the ground, but he isn't able to pick them up. The tipis stand so their entrances face eastward. The sun comes up slowly on the edge of the prairie, the entrance to the tipi opens and the morning prayers move skyward. "If I keep walking like this," thinks that Indian, "I will leave the camp and I won't stop until Milk River." Then a hand appears at the entrance to a tent and beckons. The Indian stops, puts down his things, and waves back. The hand waves to him once more, and then disappears. The Indian lifts his things, not noticing a string of beads that still lies in the damp grass, and walks over to the tent. "I will bring my horse over later," he thinks as he gets to the entrance. Then he steps into the gloom.

25. The kids who come to the church, regardless of age, speak only Serbian with me. The minute they stop talking to me and turn to talk to each other they switch to English. It is enough for me to turn my back for a moment, to start writing something on the board or to look for something among the books and papers, and the room where we work is filled with English words. "But, why?" I ask them. "How can it be that you are unable to speak with your friends in your native language?" They look at me, say nothing, blink. "Come on," I say to the boy with the curly hair, "ask your friend something, but in Serbian!" "He is not my friend," says the boy with the curly hair. "Ask him something anyway," I say. The boy with the curly hair stares at the boy next to him. "How are you," he finally says, in Serbian. "I am fine," says the other boy, also in Serbian. Both of them look up at me, as proud as if they had been reciting Hamlet. "Now you ask him something," I tell the other boy. The other boy stares at the boy with the curly hair. "And how are you?" he says, finally. "Not bad," says the boy with the curly hair. Again the
two of them turn to me. "Excellent," I say. "Should I try something else?" asks the other boy. I look at my watch: quarter to eight. "Next Friday," I say, "and for your homework, write out a conversation with your best friend in Cyrillic." "My best friend is in Osijek," says a little girl with bangs. "Imagine that she is here," I say, "that she has come to visit you and that you are telling her about the things she will see." "She will never come here," says the little girl with bangs. "Maybe you will go there," I say. "I'll ask my mother," the girl with bangs says, gets up and goes out with the other kids. They are speaking English, of course, but whispering.

26. When I leave the church, the snow squeaks under foot, puffs of breath rise and disperse above. For the first time in four weeks Thunder Cloud is not standing by the round traffic sign. I lean over, and, just in case, I kneel and search for footprints, but the snow around the sign has not been tamped down. I carefully brush away the top layer of snow: perhaps someone was standing here before and then left, for whatever reason, and then new snow fell and covered the older footprints, but no matter how deep I dig, I don't find anything. The concrete sidewalk surface soon appears and I feel my fingers freezing. I start to put back the snow, fill the hole carefully, and when I understand the pointlessness of what I am doing, I straighten up suddenly and stomp on the snow surrounding the metal pole that the round traffic sign is attached to. The blood rushes to my head, and I get dizzy and feel I might keel over. I grab the pole and let it go just as fast, because my fingers burn from the cold. I stagger, take a step or two back, and all around me patches of light shimmer in the air. "Breathe deeply," I say to myself, then I take a deep breath, hold it and count to ten and then I let it out slowly through my nose. The flashing lights stop, night returns, the round traffic sign is where it always was. Someone had tamped down all the snow around, but new snow is starting to fall, and quickly, faster than anyone can imagine, it will look just as it did a few minutes ago, unblemished and smooth, like a secret.

27. "If a wife is unfaithful," says Thunder Cloud, "they cut her nose off." I cringe as I look at the photograph of an Indian woman with no nose. "Why," I ask, "do they cut off the nose?" Thunder Cloud looks over at me. "And what else," he asks and shakes his head, "could they cut off?" "I don't know," I answer, "fingers, perhaps? An ear?" Thunder Cloud sighs. He has probably just about had it with these ignorant white people who want everything explained to them. "When you cut off a woman's ear," he says, "she can hide the wound or scar under her hair or a kerchief; if you cut off her fingers, then she is useless; but if you cut off her nose, then everyone can see what she has done and it will never occur to her to cheat on her husband again. The Indian woman in the photograph is staring straight at the camera and she does not look chagrined. "What did they do with the nose?" I ask. Thunder Cloud shrugs. "Well, they didn't drop it on the ground," I say, "for the dogs." I picture a scrawny, spotted dog carrying a nose in its muzzle,
racing among the tents while after it, barking furiously, scamper a pack of other
dogs and little children. "Did they keep it," I ask, "as a totem against curses?"
"They buried it, maybe," Thunder Cloud replies, "so no one can ever find it,
people or dogs." That I can see, I think, a little burial ground with tiny mounds,
where someone, despite the secrecy, leaves a fragrant wild flower now and then.
The sun slowly sets over the edge of the prairie, the shadows get longer, dark
creeps down the stems, and then all is dark. The leaves rustle when the wind blows
and that is all.

28. My eyes snap open, but there is no one at the window. My eyes shut, and then
open again. Nothing happens. I must have been dreaming, because just a moment
earlier-I am sure of it- by the lower right hand corner of the window frame, I saw
Thunder Cloud's face. He was shading his eyes with his right hand as if he was
trying to get a better look into the room, to spot me in the shadows. His lips were
moving, but you couldn't hear anything. He had two feathers in his hair, both of
them white, with black tips. A thick shock of hair smeared with grease and cut
straight across falls over his forehead. Drops of liquid appear on the window
pane, making a white circle, and Thunder Cloud collects them on the tip of his tongue
now and then, as if he were licking ice cream. I could get up now and go over to
the window, to see whether the corner of the pane is smudged, but I don't move.
Sometimes it is better to do nothing.

29. After class, while I sort through my papers and books, a woman wearing a
long coat comes over. It turns out that she is the mother of the little girl with the
pig tails. "How is my girl doing," asks the woman. "Is she keeping up with her
assignments?" I answer that she's fine, but that she isn't doing every homework
assignment, which isn't so bad, I add, because this is not obligatory schooling, it is
just an extra class. "She has to study," says the woman. "Otherwise how will she
go back if she doesn't even know her own language?" I nod, push the books into a
drawer, put my papers into a plastic bag. I notice the woman watching everything I
do. "Those are their assignments," I say. "Tonight I have to go over them and
grade them." Now the woman nods. "I, too, used to work with kids," she says, "but
 littler ones, at a nursery school." I don't know what to say to that. I say nothing and
listen to the crinkling of the plastic bag. "I wanted to ask you something," says the
woman, "but perhaps this isn't the best moment." I look at her. She has blue eyes.
The woman suffers my gaze, and then raises her hand and touches her fingers to
her neck. "Don't," she says, "we are in a church, after all."

30. "Another unfaithful woman," says Thunder Cloud, "whose nose was cut off.
Not her whole nose," he adds when he sees the shadow of horror on my face, "but
the tip of her nose, just enough so that everyone can see that she was unfaithful."
He pushes an open book across the table, pushes it toward me until it touches my
fingertips. The image is fuzzy and it is hard to see the disfigured nose. It is easy to see, however, that the woman is squinting, perhaps from the sun, or maybe because she feels uneasy. Her squinting eyelids and the lifted corners of her mouth give the impression that the woman is about to cry, that she is on the verge of tears. She is wearing a necklace with two strings of beads. The picture is black and white, but I assume that the two strings of the necklace were in different colors. The hair is definitely dark, parted in the middle, and tied in braids thrown back behind her. "Sometimes the braids," says Thunder Cloud, "went halfway down the back, or to the waist, or even further." I hand him back the book. I push it across the table, back the other way, until it touches his fingertips. "What are you thinking," asks Thunder Cloud. "Whether it hurts when they cut off your nose?"

31. Thunder Cloud and I go to a saint's day party. While we are on our on a bus, on our way to the northern part of town, I explain to him what a saint's day party is about, and how you are supposed to act at one. Ever since I've known him, ever since he entered, in the literal sense of the word, my life, this is the first time he is nervous. He asks me three times how his new leather jacket looks, are the fringes tidy, whether the beads are tangled, whether his part is straight. I tell him not to worry, that he has never looked better. "You should have seen me ten years ago," says Thunder Cloud. "You should have seen me ten years ago," I reply. "The whole world was way better ten years ago," says Thunder Cloud. Except for him and me the only other person on the bus is an old woman. She is sitting in front of us and turns around to look at us from time to time. The bus driver looks at us, too, not directly, but through the rearview mirror. Thunder Cloud pays no attention to them. "Maybe I should have brought my tobacco and other things with me, so that I could smoke a peace pipe with the host." I imagine priest, pipe in hand, his cheeks puffed with biting smoke. "Next time we smoke the peace pipe," I say to Thunder Cloud. "Now we will eat sweet, cooked wheat and drink brandy." "I don't like brandy," says Thunder Cloud. "You don't have to drink it down," I say. "It'll do for you to lick the rim of the glass." Thunder Cloud turns to look out the window. The driver's eyes appear again in the rearview mirror. The old woman coughs. The bus stops, the front door opens, a group of teenagers tumbles in with cries and laughter. The boys are wearing wide, baggy pants; the girls, despite the cold, have short tops on that don't even cover their midriffs; they have locks of hair dyed in all different colors. They drop into the seats as if they'd been doing hard labor until then, put their feet up, lean their heads back on the windowpane, rub their eyes. Then they all start talking at once, even the old woman; leaning forward, she starts telling the driver something. The driver answers, but the woman doesn't hear, and she props a hand behind her ear. A little later, everyone stops talking.

32. "Adam, the first man, refused to enter into a community with God," says the
priest. "And so it was that though it looked as if he were winning freedom, in fact he was embracing death. And he wasn't just embracing death for his own sake," continued the priest, "but for all of nature. All of nature," says the priest and spreads his hands, "is mortal thanks to Adam's choice. Because, with his denial, Adam was preventing nature from overcoming its own mortality. But God is good," smiles the priest, "and instead of turning his back on man and consigning him completely to oblivion, he created a community through his son, Jesus Christ, who became a man and thereby made it possible for nature and people to achieve immortality in community with him." Thunder Cloud waits patiently for me to finish my stuttering translation of the priest's words, and then he says: "I know a different story. This is how it was: one day Napi, whom you call the Old Man, fashioned the world from mud, including a woman for himself. Napi and his wife made people, but they couldn't agree on everything. Napi, for instance, wanted people to have ten fingers on each hand, but his wife felt it would be better for them to have four fingers and a thumb, and that it is how it was in the end. One of the things they could not agree on was death. They argued, and argued, and then Napi said, 'I will throw a piece of bison manure into the water; if it floats on the surface, then man will be dead for four days and then come back to life again. If it sinks, then he will die for good.' He tossed a little chunk of bison manure into water and it floated. His wife, however, objected. She said, 'Manure is no good for these things; I will toss this stone into the water; if it floats on the surface, people will be dead for four days and then come back to life again, and if it sinks, they will die for good.' The stone sank, and death arrived among people, but Napi and his wife weren't sorry, because if people had lived forever, then they would never have felt compassion for those near to them." Now it is the priest waiting patiently for me to finish my jerky translation of the Indian's words, and while he listens, he shakes his head from time to time. "The mud is the same as it is in our story," says the priest in the end, "and their death, too, is eternal because they do not embrace a community with God, although it isn't easy to decide between a piece of bison manure and a piece of stone." "Should I translate that for him?" I ask. "No need," says the priest. He takes Thunder Cloud's hand in his and slowly enunciates, word for word, in Serbian: "The doors to eternal life open through God, do you understand?" Thunder Cloud nods and grins. "Hallelujah! he says, "hallelujah!" Then he turns to me. "I should have brought the peace pipe," he says.

33. The kids sitting at the first desk slide over and make room for Thunder Cloud. Squeezed between them, Thunder Cloud looks like a giant. "I am Vladimir," says the boy sitting to his right. "And I'm Ru_ica," says the girl sitting to his left. "I'm Thunder Cloud," says Thunder Cloud. "We know," answer the children in a chorus. "Who," I ask, "is going to show our guest Cyrillic?" They all raise their hands, some stand up, one boy climbs up onto his chair, another leans on the Indian's back. Thunder Cloud also raises his hand, trying to calm them, and when he sees that they are paying no attention, he throws his head back and lets out a
long, trembling cry. They all stop talking. Thunder Cloud grins. "That is part of a song," he says, "that we used to sing before we scalped our enemy after we conquered him." "What does it mean, to scalp," asks Vladimir. "That's when you chop someone's hair off their head," says a boy in a striped shirt, "but along with the skin." "Ow, that hurts," says Ru_ica. "It doesn't hurt," says Thunder Cloud, "because the enemy is usually dead before that." "Who killed him?" asks Vladimir. "Our guest has come for us to show him Cyrillic," I say, "and not to discuss the art of warfare. "Maybe next time he can bring a tomahawk," says the boy in the striped shirt. "OK," I reply, "and now why doesn't someone write out a sentence using Cyrillic letters on the board." No one moves. "They don't have to write anything," says Thunder Cloud. "Why don't they tell me a story about Cyrillic letters." "What sort of story?" I ask. "When we want to learn about a thing," says Thunder Cloud, "they tell us the story of how it came into the world. Everything has its own story." he says, "every living and non-living thing, and when you know its story, then you know the thing the story is about." "Yeah," pipes up Vladimir, "so how did Cyrillic begin?" "Once, in the olden days," I say, "many, many years ago, there was a man on the muddy shore of a lake who saw the tracks of marsh birds and thought that these tracks, which told him what birds were here and what they were doing, could be used for writing down other things, too. He took a stick," I go on, "and on the soft earth he first wrote the letter 'A'; later he made up the rest of the letters, the period, comma, exclamation point and question mark, and that is how Cyrillic first began." "I didn't know that," says the boy in the striped shirt. "Me neither," says Vladimir. "Me neither," said Ru_ica. They all look at Thunder Cloud. "Were those the tracks of a heron?" he asks.

34. The phone rings late at night. "What's this about a heron?" shouts the priest. "What is this nonsense, what was he going on about?" I hold the receiver away from my ear, and then bring it back when the priest's voice dies down. "He didn't say that the heron invented Cyrillic," I repeat. "It was me telling a story about how Cyrillic came from the tracks of birds on the shore of a lake, and that is when he brought up the heron." There was silence at the other end of the line. "Hello?" I say. "What lake?" asks the priest. "Excuse me?" "Where was the lake," asks the priest. ""I don't know," I say, "maybe Ohrid?" "Do herons live there?" asks the priest. "There must be birds," I say. "I wouldn't be surprised if there was a heron." The priest coughs. "I was worried sick," he says, "now I feel better." "Me, too," I say. "Good night," says the priest. "Good night," I say and hang up the phone. A moment later the phone rings again. "It's me," says the priest. "I know," I reply. "Do you have any idea," asks the priest, "what a heron looks like?"

35. The first, the smallest, of the rooms has displays on the earliest North American Indians. Then you go into the next, slightly larger room, dedicated to the history of the Blackfoot tribe. That room leads into a third, the largest hall,
brightly lit, which is full of displays and scenes from everyday life, including a tall tent, a tipi, raised in the middle of the room. We go over slowly, as if we are creeping up to it. There are deer drawn on the tent. Their hoofs rest on a wavy line that goes around the whole tent, while their horns are touching black circles. "Those are stars," says Thunder Cloud, "and the lines are mountain rivers, so that the one who lives in this tipi is as valiant as a deer on a cliff and will not stop until he touches the stars." One of the tent flaps is raised and, when I peer in, I can see clothing hanging on a string, a bed covered in blankets, two pairs of moccasins, an empty kettle, a bow and a quiver. "Come in," says Thunder Cloud, and touches my shoulder with the tips of his fingers. I bend over, take a step, enter, and straighten up. I hear Thunder Cloud lowering the tent flap. For a moment I'm frightened: nothing's easier than getting lost where no one gets lost. The light in the tent is gentle, thick, almost milky, and when I turn to the middle, it seems to be following me, as if I am entering a glowing cocoon. I look up and through the opening at the top of the tent I see the stars. It is night. A coyote howls, then an owl hoots, then everything is still. Then a branch snaps under someone's foot and fear creeps into my throat, my forehead beads with sweat. I drop to my knees, lie on my side. The stars move faster and faster across the rim of the opening, leaving a pale trail behind them. I shut my eyes and I'm gone.

36. Someone taps softly and persistently at my window, but I do not get up. I pull my head under the covers, curl into a ball, press against my ears with my hands. When I drag myself out of bed in the morning, there is nothing to see, and there are no footprints in the snow. I look into the mailbox, just in case someone has put a message in there for me, but the mailbox is empty. I walk all the way around the house, peer into the garage, poke a finger into the little birdhouse: nothing has changed. Only later, under a bush, I find a dead mouse.

37. On Friday, exactly at nine, I leave the church. There is a warm wind blowing and the snow is melting underfoot. A fire truck siren howls in the distance. When I pass by the round traffic sign, it creaks, as if it is remembering something. I think of stopping, of inspecting it up close, but I know that the priest is standing at the window, behind the curtain, and that he is watching me. I don't stop, I keep going, all the way to the crosswalk. I wait for the light to change on the traffic light, and when the green letters invite me to walk, I start to walk until I find myself across the street.

Read more: http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/learning-cyrillic#ixzz2iJ9lvOrt
"Some businessmen” was how Skinny Zyama had described the two gangsters from New Jersey.

“You want me there for a meeting with businessmen?” Kostya had asked.

“You have other plans on a Wednesday afternoon?”

“No.”

“Wear a jacket,” Zyama had said.

Now, stationed as instructed beside Skinny Zyama’s mahogany desk, Kostya appraised the gangsters. Zyama had placed two leather armchairs in front of his desk, but only the smaller of the two had consented to sit. The larger one, the one doing all the talking, had turned his chair sideways and perched himself on its arm. Instinctively, Kostya gauged each man’s weight. They were both wearing suits, but that made no difference. Kostya had been conditioned by years at the gym, and his mind conjured up a man’s weight and class just as, seeing an apple, it conjured up taste and smell. He’d barely considered the gangsters before his mind had announced: Sixty-four kilos and eighty-five kilos; welterweight and cruiserweight. This was one of his few demonstrable skills—which, like the others, had brought him little profit.

The larger gangster looked powerful through the back and shoulders, but he carried himself arrogantly, gestured excessively with his hands, and punctuated his demands by thrusting out his chin. In contrast, the smaller one hardly moved at all. He kept his hands folded in his lap and followed the conversation with his eyes. His neck and his ankles were
thin, and he was pale in the manner of someone who is either very sick or very spartan. Of the two, Kostya supposed that the smaller man posed the greater danger, though, to be precise, the greatest danger was posed by neither of them. The greatest danger was posed by Skinny Zyama, who had assumed an obnoxious air of invulnerability.

“These are competitive times. You could benefit from our help,” the larger gangster said.

“The place is busy four nights a week,” Zyama said. “Impossible to get a table Friday or Saturday without a reservation. We have the best Vegas-style floor show in the city. Professional dancers trained in Russia. Where’s my competition?”

“There are other restaurants. They could become more successful.”

“The other restaurants are run by imbeciles. Their customers are people who couldn’t get a table here.”

“With the right guidance, those restaurants could improve. With connections, they could attract popular entertainers from New York and New Jersey.”

“Listen, Alla Pugacheva and Arkady Raikin could perform every Saturday night for a month and those idiots would still find a way to lose money.”

“There are other possibilities. Something unfortunate could happen to your restaurant or to you.”

Zyama, who had been reclining in his suède admiral’s chair, tilted forward and made a production of looking the gangster in the eye. “You think you’re the first ones to come in here? Understand: I’m in business all these years not because I give money to every hoodlum with his hand out.”

Kostya watched the larger gangster unbutton his jacket and slide his hand inside. Cursing Skinny Zyama, Kostya took a step in the gangster’s direction. If the man had a gun, there
wasn’t much he could do about it, but he knew that if the gangster motioned toward his pocket he was required to take a step forward. There was an understanding among everyone in the room that this was how it was supposed to be. The script had been written long ago and performed by other men in other rooms and in movies.

Seeing this, the gangster grinned. He proceeded to feel around inside his jacket, and then he extended his hand. In place of a gun was a business card.

“My gun I keep down here,” he said, raising the cuff of his left trouser leg. Strapped above his ankle was a pistol in a black padded holster. “You see, we are civilized businessmen. Before we reach for that, we reach for this.”

He placed the card on Skinny Zyama’s desk.

“We manage very respectable artists. We provide security. Many good Russian restaurants in New Jersey and Brooklyn are our customers. There is a phone number on the card. It is our mobile phone. Think about what we said and call. If we don’t hear from you, we’ll come Saturday night to see for ourselves how successful you are.”

After the gangsters left, Skinny Zyama picked up the business card and flicked it into his wastebasket. He passed his hand along the surface of his desk and examined his fingertips for dust. “Small-timers. Nobodies. Who do they think they’re dealing with?”

Kostya waited for a few moments to see if he would say anything else. Zyama rapped his knuckles on the edge of the desk. He spun the knob of his Rolodex. He reached into a drawer for a pack of cigarettes.

“Is that it?” Kostya asked.

“That one sits staring like a mummy. The other one with the gun on his leg. Think they can intimidate me in my own place. I shit on them from a tall bridge,” Zyama said.
That was Zyama’s final word. He was Zyama Karp, the impresario of the Russian Riviera restaurant. He was a man of influence. Not someone to be pushed around. And, after all, he had Kostya, a Siberian boxing champion.

“If they come back on Saturday, you take care of them,” Zyama said.

From the Russian Riviera, Kostya drove to the Prima Donna Ballet Academy to return a blouse that Ivetta had forgotten at his apartment. Ivetta frequently forgot things at his apartment, only to discover that the thing she had forgotten was exactly the thing she could not live without. Kostya no longer resisted this; he had learned that it was best simply to return the item—a blouse, a pair of earrings, a lipstick—as soon as possible. He had also learned that once Ivetta resumed possession of these things her need for them diminished.

Ivetta was waiting at the entrance to the ballet school. She took a moment to confirm that he had brought the blouse, then lifted herself into the van.

“I have five minutes,” she said. “We should drive around the block.”

As Kostya eased the van onto the street, Ivetta looked up at her mother’s office, on the second floor of the Ballet Academy.

“I think I see her standing there,” Ivetta said.

Kostya interpreted this as a signal to drive faster, but when he accelerated Ivetta told him to slow down. If her mother was watching, Ivetta didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of seeing her behave furtively. Kostya didn’t completely understand the rules that governed Ivetta’s attitude toward her mother, but he knew that Luda Sorkin disapproved of him. Luda had been a prima ballerina. She was a cultured person. She was also a successful businesswoman. She had schooled her daughter in the fine arts, she had given her a university education, and she was grooming her to take over the business.
That such a woman would want more for her daughter than someone who was a failed boxer, a doorman, and an illegal immigrant seemed to him perfectly reasonable. In fact, he could understand Luda’s logic better than Ivetta’s. Why Ivetta should not want to be with him made much more sense than why she should. When Kostya told her as much recently, she had led him from the bed to their reflection in his mirrored closet door.

“We are beautiful together,” she said.

Kostya supposed they looked good. He still went to the gym five days a week and was conscious of his physique. And Ivetta had the long, slender muscles of a trained dancer. At the restaurant and on the street, Kostya was aware that men looked at her. She was attractive in the usual ways, but Kostya’s eyes were always drawn to the intricate places where different parts of her joined: her shoulders, her collarbone, the backs of her knees, her ankles, her hands.

“You could be beautiful together with someone else,” Kostya told her.

“Then you don’t see what I see,” Ivetta said glumly, and she moved away from him and hunched on the edge of the bed.

That he didn’t see what Ivetta saw had been precisely the origin of the conversation, and so her answer did nothing to clarify things. Kostya considered pointing this out but knew that it would only irritate her further.

“You are honest and good,” Ivetta had finally declared from her desolation at the edge of the bed.

And now, because he was honest and good, Ivetta wanted to protect him from Luda’s sneering condescension. For this reason, she had asked that he find someone else to work his shift on Saturday night, when her mother was going to make a rare appearance at the Russian Riviera.

“But I am a doorman,” Kostya said. “What do I care how
she looks at me?”
“I care,” Ivetta said.
Most of her family would be there Saturday night, and she
did not want to introduce him to them under those
circumstances. If they were to meet him, it should be done
across a table, properly and with respect. Not with her family
celebrating her grandfather’s birthday while Kostya was
relegated to the door or the bar—an employee.
“Did you ask Zyama?” Ivetta said.
“I will.”
Up until that afternoon, Kostya had been prepared to do
just that, but now he couldn’t imagine how it was possible.
Zyama had expended considerable energy publicizing the fact
that he had a Siberian boxing champion working his door—he
would have opposed a change at the door on a night without
gangsters. And, even if Zyama could be persuaded, Kostya’s
conscience would not allow it. Which meant that, as
alternatives went, Kostya had two: he could work or he could
quit. And he preferred to risk the possibility of gangsters
against the certainty of unemployment.
To Ivetta, of course, he could confess none of this. Her
reaction would be predictable and extreme. She would go to
Zyama or to the police. Both of which would mean the end of
his job. Also, she would likely regard the situation as further
evidence of their need to run off together and start a new life in
another city, far away from her mother. She had urged him to
do this before, to leave his demeaning job at the Russian
Riviera, to escape somewhere, get married, go to school, start a
business, buy a house, have children, live happily. The idea
was tempting; Kostya had no attachment to Toronto or to the
Russian Riviera, but, at thirty-four, he was no longer a boy. If
he quit his job and ran away with Ivetta and she grew tired of
him—a man without an education, with few talents, deficient
in English—he was afraid that he would find himself back at zero. He would lose even the few things that he had managed to accomplish.

At fourteen, in the gymnasium of the No. 4 High School, Kostya and his classmates, stripped to their underpants, had submitted to a series of physical tests administered by the head boxing trainer of the Omsk Spartak Athletics Club. The man had measured the length of their arms; checked with calipers the thickness of the skin below their eyebrows; had them execute the standing broad jump and a complex version of hopscotch. Then, to eliminate criers and bleeders, he had punched each boy in the nose. From a class of twenty boys, he had selected three. Kostya was one of them.

This was in 1975, one year before the Montreal Olympics. The trainer, widely known to be the son of an enemy of the people, had invited himself to Kostya’s apartment to meet with his parents. In the communal kitchen, Kostya’s mother served tea and condensed milk. The meeting was very formal, as though important business were being transacted. Kostya’s trainer presented himself using his full name: Emil Osipovich Shtenberg.

“How would you like it,” Emil asked, “if in five years your son was representing his country at the first Olympics to be held on Russian soil?”

“The boy’s mother wants to know if he will be hurt,” his father said.

“I would be a liar if I said he will not be hit, but you have my word he will not be hurt.”

The discussion did not go much further.

“My wife and I have never been to Moscow,” his father said.

“It is a marvellous city,” Emil said. “I am sure you will enjoy it.”
But although Kostya spent most of the next five years in the gym, his parents didn’t get to go to Moscow. Since the Americans didn’t go to Moscow, either, Emil said it was just as well. Any boxer who claimed to be an Olympic champion without facing any Americans was a fraud. With this in mind, Emil fixed his sights on the future. For the Los Angeles Olympics, Kostya would be twenty-three, which, in Emil’s estimation, was the ideal age for a middleweight. And so Kostya persisted. Emil secured him a job at a furniture plant, whose director, a boxing supporter, made generous allowances for Kostya’s training schedule. Kostya received the privileges afforded athletes: food coupons, a new tracksuit, occasional trips to cities in western Siberia and northern Kazakhstan. Over time, he also attained a degree of local recognition: girls smiled at him and men slapped him on the back.

By the winter of 1984, Kostya was the middleweight champion of Omsk. Then of western Siberia. To take the title, he beat a boy from Novosibirsk, opening a gash over his left eye and flooring him repeatedly with straight rights. After the referee stopped the fight, the boy sat on the canvas and wept. On the train back to Omsk, Emil admonished Kostya for showing too much sympathy.

“He can’t go to his right,” Kostya said, “and his mother has cancer of the pancreas.”

“Whose mother doesn’t have cancer of the pancreas?” Emil said.

“I don’t see what’s to celebrate.”

“In life, anytime you win, celebrate.”

In this sense, Emil had been right. That fight, it turned out, was the high point of Kostya’s career. Soon afterward, he lost a split decision to a fighter from Chelyabinsk and once again failed to qualify for the national team. The fight had been close, but one of the judges had scored it overwhelmingly in
his opponent’s favor. When the announcement was made, the referee had had to restrain Emil from assaulting the judge.

According to Emil, politics had been at play. The authorities had not wanted to advance a fighter trained by the son of an enemy of the people. Fifty years earlier, before Emil was even born, Stalin had accused his father of Trotskyism and shipped him to Norilsk. Emil had been paying the price ever since. Now Kostya was being punished as well. The system was vile and corrupt, and it was only a small consolation when the Soviet Union boycotted the Los Angeles Olympics.

Under the strictest confidence, Emil told Kostya that he was finished with the Soviet Union.

“It so happens,” Emil said, “my father was Jewish.” Laughing, he added, “Hard to believe that this would bring me anything except more trouble.”

A year later, Emil boarded a train and was gone. He promised Kostya a postcard from wherever it was that he landed. He promised to bring him over to the West, where his natural gifts would be rewarded. Kostya waited for the postcard, but it never came. Gradually, he deviated from his training regimen. He spent more time with friends from the furniture plant, went to the banya, drank a little, got involved with women. Occasionally, when he felt the urge in his back and shoulders, Kostya returned to the gym, but once there he felt like a guest. People recognized his face, but fewer and fewer remembered his name.

In this way, like everyone else, Kostya lived his life. He watched the Seoul Olympics on television and felt only a passing sense of regret. He remained at the furniture plant until it was purchased by a consortium of Germans and Swedes. Afterward, he took the kind of work available to him: physical labor, often outdoors. It was when he was working on a lumber crew, surrounded by men like himself—the anonymous many
who were failing to prosper in the new Russia—that he received the letter from Emil. The envelope bore a Toronto address. In the letter, Emil apologized for not having written for six years, but offered to make good on his promise to bring Kostya to the free world. The letter included specific instructions and a check for nine hundred American dollars. Twelve years later than planned, Kostya rode the train from Omsk to Moscow—only now his destination was not the Olympic Village but a travel agency. Partly because the Peruvians did not demand a visa, Kostya bought a plane ticket to Lima. He turned the remainder of his money over to an old woman who claimed to be Emil’s aunt. She provided him with a pillow and a wool blanket and helped him push a coffee table against her living-room wall. Kostya stayed with her for three nights, until his flight departed for Peru. Most of the other passengers on the plane were Russian, and Kostya wondered how many of them had the same intentions he did. It seemed strange that so many Russians would want to go to Peru. To him, almost all of them looked suspicious. He assumed that he looked suspicious as well, and feared that one of the passengers or the stewardesses would denounce him. But when the plane set down for the connection in Gander, Newfoundland, Kostya was invited to exit along with everyone else.

To his surprise, everything happened just as Emil had written. He followed the line of passengers down a long hallway and found himself inside the terminal. He chose a chair in the remotest part of the concourse and went through the contents of his shoulder bag. At the very bottom he found his sneakers. Doing his best to casually conceal what he was doing, he peeled the insole off his right shoe and palmed the scrap of paper he had hidden there. Then he repacked his bag and walked the floor of the terminal until he saw what he was
looking for. Standing near a newsstand was a woman in a uniform. Kostya did not know what the uniform signified, but it looked official. Willing himself forward, as though for the proverbial leap into cold water, Kostya approached the woman and read from the scrap of paper in his hand.

“Ya yem a refugee,” Kostya said.

Subverting his every reasonable expectation, the woman responded in heavily accented Russian.

“You want refugee status?”

“Yes,” Kostya said.

“Follow me,” she instructed.

Kostya spent two weeks in the refugee shelter in Gander before he was claimed by Father Nikita, a Russian Orthodox priest who operated a halfway house for Russian refugees in Toronto. When he arrived at the house, Emil was there to greet him. That same night, Kostya moved into Emil’s one-bedroom apartment in the north end of the city. The building was occupied mainly by Russians, flanked by other buildings occupied by other Russians. Many of these Russians were also Jews, though Kostya couldn’t particularly tell the difference. On the main street, there were Russian delicatessens, Russian bookshops, Russian video stores, and even signs and posters in Russian tacked onto the bus shelters and telephone poles. At the nearby park and at the playground, Kostya heard as much Russian as English. For Kostya, the non-Russian world existed only in the various gyms where Emil took him for their workouts. But, even there, Kostya was rarely required to communicate in any but the crudest ways. He learned the English vocabulary of boxing: jab, cross, hook, slip, uppercut. Also useful was the word “O.K.”

Not long after Kostya settled in, Emil drove him to meet their benefactor. They made the short trip in Emil’s minivan, which he had been using for years to deliver pizza.
“Don’t talk unless you have to,” Emil said. “And, no matter what I say, don’t contradict me.”

The man they were to meet was Bomka Goldfarb. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Bomka had sold real estate in Toronto, but after the collapse he had returned to his native Kiev and made a fortune dealing in manganese. He was one of the richest Russian immigrants in Toronto.

Bomka designated the meeting not at his offices but at a new Russian restaurant in which he held a partial interest. The restaurant was minutes away from Emil’s apartment, in a strip mall. It featured, Emil had heard, a massive fountain in the foyer.

The fountain, Bomka Goldfarb explained when he greeted them, was a reproduction of one he had seen in Rome. When he invested in the restaurant, it had been on the condition that it include such a fountain. The fountain was a marble sculpture. It reached almost to the ceiling and consisted of four fish supporting the torso of a powerfully built man. The man appeared to be either drinking from or blowing into a large shell. To Kostya’s eyes, the man’s face bore a resemblance to Bomka Goldfarb’s.

Bomka directed them to a table near a broad stage that boasted a gleaming white piano. He bade them wait, then returned several moments later accompanied by a thin, pinched-faced man.

“This,” Bomka said, “is my partner, Zyama Karp. The restaurant is his vision.”

Bomka took a seat at the table, though Zyama remained standing.

“Zyama,” Bomka said, “you should be acquainted with these people. Konstantin Petrov, boxing champion, and his trainer, senior Soviet coach Emil Osipovich Shtenberg.”

“A boxing champion?” Zyama asked.
“Very talented,” Bomka said. “Emil came to me and said, ‘How would you like to invest in a boxer?’ I had been thinking about a racehorse. But Emil said, ‘A boxer is cheaper and more interesting than a horse.’ He’ll be fighting at the Trump Plaza just as soon as we can get his immigration in order.”

“Where were you a boxing champion?” Zyama asked.
“In Siberia,” Emil said. “In 1984. He would have gone to Los Angeles, if not for the boycott.”

“Must have been very disappointing for you,” Zyama said.
“You cannot imagine,” Emil said.
“I was talking to him,” Zyama said.
“It was disappointing for both of us,” Emil said.
“What’s wrong with him? Can’t he speak?”
“Of course he can speak,” Emil said.
“When do you become more interesting than a horse?” Zyama asked.
“What horse?” Kostya said.
“I like a sense of humor,” Zyama said.

The meeting ended with Bomka’s renewed pledge to expedite Kostya’s immigration process. He had top lawyers in his employ. They were extremely well connected. If asked, they could get asylum for Stalin, he said.

On the drive home, Emil was in very high spirits. More than once, he volunteered that he was pleased with the results of their meeting.

“You made a good impression,” Emil said.
“Why did you say I was a champion?”
“It’s a word someone like Bomka Goldfarb understands.”
“He’ll be disappointed. I’m not the fighter I was six years ago,” Kostya said.

“You’re better than you think,” Emil said. “Most American boxers aren’t fit to tie your boots.”
“But if you had written me six years ago,” Kostya said.
“Six years ago I was delivering pizzas. And when I wasn’t delivering pizzas I was guarding the lobby of a condominium. So what was I supposed to write you? ‘Dear Kostya, I have no money. The boxing establishment treats me like a nuisance. Nobody here cares if I live or die’? What would you have done with this kind of letter?”

Kostya thought that he would have liked such a letter. It wouldn’t have changed anything, but, thinking about the letter, he could see it on the tidy kitchen table where his mother would have left it. He could see himself, in the evening, after the factory, sitting with the letter in his hands. He imagined himself in that past. It was good to hear from Emil, to read about his troubles. It was good to think that, in a distant country, he had a friend who remembered him. Ivetta had never met Emil, but she had an opinion of him. She also had an opinion of Bomka Goldfarb and Skinny Zyama. It angered her that such people would deceive Kostya, and it angered her that he would allow himself to be deceived.

“Bomka gave assurances and the lawyers gave assurances. Emil trusted them and I trusted Emil,” Kostya said.

“Who in their right mind would trust a person like Bomka Goldfarb?”

“He paid Emil to bring me over. He sent a check each month for rent and expenses. We thought, Why would he do that if he wasn’t serious?”

“Last month, I bought a pair of shoes. Even at the store, I wasn’t sure I wanted them. But they were only sixty dollars. I wore them once. Long enough to become bored with them. Now they’re in the back of my closet.”

“It’s true,” Kostya said. “It’s always good if you can afford to buy.”

But if you couldn’t afford to buy, things were different. And the nature of the difference could not be explained to
someone like Ivetta, who had forgotten what it was like to be deprived. Ivetta would say that there are always choices, but after a certain point—even when looking back—Kostya could not see the choices. Would he have been better off in Siberia if he had declined Emil’s offer? Should he have returned to Moscow with Emil? Could these be considered legitimate choices? To his way of thinking, confronted by the available options, he had always just pursued the least unpromising.

The same applied to Bomka Goldfarb. Both he and Emil had been subject to Bomka’s whims. Given the circumstances, what were their alternatives? Bomka had told them to sign papers, and so Kostya had signed papers. Bomka had told them to wait, and so they had waited. Occasionally, Emil made phone calls to ascertain the progress. He made the calls from behind his closed bedroom door, but the apartment was not large and the door was hardly soundproof. First, Emil had called the lawyers. Later, he had called an associate of Bomka Goldfarb’s. Then, when the associate became unreachable, Emil left messages with a secretary.

To placate Kostya, Emil posed a rhetorical question: If Bomka has forgotten about us, why are we still getting monthly checks?

The delay was understandable. Lawyers were notoriously slow. And who could compete with immigration officials—bureaucrats—when it came to laziness and inefficiency?

Emil counselled patience, but he paid a promoter to get Kostya on the undercard of a show in Windsor. This he considered money well spent—many of the fighters on the card would be Americans, and the whole thing would be broadcast on television in Windsor and Detroit. Also, the promoter had given his word that he would pit Kostya against a young fighter, a Golden Gloves champion, handled by smart people, expected to go far. But, most important, the show would allow
Bomka to see with his own eyes the value he was getting for his money.

The fight was scheduled for the February of a cold winter. To get to Bomka, Emil parked near his mansion and spent the predawn hours wrapped in blankets, sitting in the van. When Bomka left for work, Emil tailed him to his office. He waited an appropriate half hour and then went in, bringing with him a box of chocolates for the secretary. When he recounted the story for Kostya, he stressed that Bomka had been very glad to see him—and particularly glad about the imminent boxing match in Windsor. So glad, in fact, that, to undertake the journey, he planned to hire one limousine for himself, his wife, his kids, and Skinny Zyama and a second limousine solely for Emil and Kostya.

“I hope you refused the limousine,” Kostya said.
“You don’t want the limousine?”
“Someone who hasn’t won a fight in six years shouldn’t arrive in a limousine.”

“To be honest,” Emil said, “I don’t entirely disagree, but this isn’t something I could have explained to Bomka Goldfarb. Here’s what I suggest: if it bothers you, ignore it’s a limousine. Pretend it’s the van.”

But the limousine, a black stretch Cadillac, was not easy to ignore. As soon as they climbed inside, the driver drew their attention to the bar, the television, the VCR, the selection of Russian videos, and the refrigerator stocked with smoked meats and caviar. Everything compliments of Bomka Goldfarb.

“He has a fight today. No food. No alcohol. No distractions,” Emil said.
“Too bad,” the driver said.
“That’s the way it is,” Emil said.
“It’s four hours to Windsor,” the driver said. “A long time to stare out the window at nothing.”
“Élite athletes must be focussed,” Emil said.
“No doubt,” the driver said. “I was never an élite athlete myself, but I know something about it. My daughter is a dancer and my ex-wife was a prima ballerina. Danced with Baryshnikov.”
“Very interesting,” Emil said.
“Boxer,” the driver said, “if you get bored staring out the window, say the word, I’ll tell you my life story.”

Eventually, Kostya heard his story, though not before he and Emil arrived at the Bavaria Club in Windsor—a low, two-story building with a wooden roof and white stucco walls. From the parking lot, it resembled a restaurant or a modest hotel. Obeying signs and arrows, Emil and Kostya found the Sports Hall; there they discovered a ring encircled by several rows of metal folding chairs and a handful of people—easily identified as other fighters and trainers waiting for the weigh-in. The promoter saw Emil coming and, despite the look on Emil’s face, extended his hand and smiled. Emil leaned into the promoter’s face, ignoring his outstretched hand, and started shouting—mainly in English but partly in Russian. Kostya understood only the Russian, a collection of obscenities bred of the prison camps and the Army.

After Emil finished his tirade, he stalked back to Kostya.
“We could call Bomka,” Kostya said. “Say the fight is cancelled.”
“No use,” Emil said. “We’re fucked.”

In a limousine somewhere between Toronto and Windsor, Bomka, his wife, his two sons, and Skinny Zyama were eating and drinking the things that Kostya and Emil had denied themselves. Kostya imagined them dressed for a casino but installed on the metal folding chairs, in a half-empty room decorated with German banners and dingy photographs of the German countryside.
“What do you want to do?” Kostya asked.
“We came here to fight, we fight,” Emil said.

Fourth on the undercard, Kostya fought. His opponent—no Golden Gloves champion—was a grim, heavily muscled black fighter who, in place of satin trunks and boxing boots, wore Army-surplus shorts and basketball shoes. Outside the ring, with a weapon, he would have been the sort of man Kostya would have been happy to avoid, but inside the ring he was plodding and mechanical. Had he cared about the promoter or the spectators, Kostya might have tried to carry the fight into the second round. But there was nobody to impress. Bomka’s wife had taken one step inside the Sports Hall, paused, spoken three words, and then she, Bomka, and the children had disappeared. Only Skinny Zyama remained, and so he was able to watch Kostya joylessly punish the black fighter to the body and then stop him with a left hook to the temple.

Afterward, by way of congratulations, Skinny Zyama handed Kostya a Russian Riviera matchbook.

“Call if you want a job,” he said.

In the summer of 1974, Mikhail Baryshnikov defected in Toronto. In 1978, at the Joint Distribution office in Rome, Luda Sorkin brandished the letter that Baryshnikov had written to her. The letter was not long, but in it Baryshnikov devoted an entire paragraph to Toronto. A little provincial, perhaps, Baryshnikov mused, but a good place to start a ballet school.

“At the Riga Ballet, I danced with Baryshnikov,” Luda Sorkin informed the caseworker.

Luda Sorkin displayed this same letter when the family met with a diplomat at the Canadian Embassy, on Via Zara; she showed it to her remedial-English instructor at George Brown College, having had it translated shortly after the family arrived in Toronto, and when she applied for a small-business loan from the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services she carried the
letter, her diploma, and a Latvian newspaper clipping that included a photograph of herself dancing with Baryshnikov.

Seated at the bar of the Russian Riviera, Volodya Sorkin told Kostya, “There wasn’t enough room in the marriage for the three of us.”

“You, her, and Baryshnikov?” Kostya asked.

“Me, her, and the letter,” Volodya said.

Volodya was a regular at the Russian Riviera. On nights when his limousine wasn’t booked, he stopped in to catch Ivetta’s performance in the Vegas-style floor show. Before the show, he nursed a drink and talked to whoever was around—mostly to Kostya, who had little to do but sit at the bar. Fights and confrontations were uncommon. The clientele at the Russian Riviera was predominantly middle-aged, educated, and relatively well off. Also, it was Jewish. In this respect, Kostya discerned a cultural difference between Russians and Jews: on the rare occasion when there was trouble, nobody pulled a knife.

Through Volodya, Kostya became acquainted with Ivetta. Until then, Kostya hadn’t had much interaction with the dancers and musicians, who socialized mainly with one another, but he had taken notice of Ivetta. Not because of some striking physical attribute—with the costumes and the makeup, all the dancers looked like variations on the same woman—but because she possessed a quality that Kostya had observed in the best athletes: she gave the impression of effortlessness. It was the illusion that the forces of time and gravity did not apply equally to all people.

Her face and neck still flushed with the charge of the performance, Ivetta slid in beside her father at the bar. She kissed Volodya affectionately, and seemed to take no notice of Kostya until Volodya turned inclusively in his direction.

“This is my good friend Kostya,” Volodya said.
“Very nice to meet you, Kostya,” Ivetta said.  
“Kostya is a boxer,” Volodya said.  
“Was a boxer,” Kostya said.  
“Not anymore?” Ivetta asked.  
“I wouldn’t say so.”  
“When were you a boxer?” Ivetta asked.  
“It depends who you ask,” Kostya said.  
“I asked you.”  
“Then I would say six years ago.”  
“And if I asked someone else?”  
“Then they might say two weeks ago.”  
Ivetta fell silent, arched her neck, and studied him. She seemed to be contemplating something, but Kostya couldn’t imagine what. The expression on her face made Kostya wonder if she had misheard what he had said. It was possible, maybe because of the noise in the restaurant, that she had heard not the words he said but instead some strange words that sounded like them. Kostya thought to repeat himself but reconsidered. Instead, he told her that he had seen her dance.  
“She’s the star,” Volodya said.  
“She’s very good.”  
“Nice of you to say,” Ivetta said.  
“If I could move like you, I would still be boxing.”  
On subsequent nights, even when Volodya wasn’t there, Ivetta took to joining Kostya at the bar. At first, she did so seemingly without intention. After the show, she would pass by the bar, evidently on her way somewhere else, and discover Kostya—unexpectedly, as if for the first time. Later, the pretense was dropped.  
Initially, their conversations centered on Kostya’s boxing and his life in Siberia. Ivetta seemed interested in things that Kostya found mundane, if not embarrassing—the details of the furniture plant, his boxing trials with Emil, his empty years
after the fall of Communism. In time, Ivetta spoke about her life with her mother and her own ambitions.

“I dance here to make my father happy,” Ivetta said. “Unlike some of the other dancers, I don’t have any fantasies.”

Ivetta had been nine when her family came to Toronto and sixteen when her parents divorced. In Riga, Volodya had been a civil engineer, but in Toronto he could not find a job in line with his qualifications. Instead, he had worked for years as a taxi-driver to support the family while Ivetta’s mother tried to establish her ballet school. Once the school was established, she discarded him. Volodya was no longer the man she’d married, she said. She had married an intellectual; now she lived with a cabdriver.

The divorce had been bitter, and her parents did not stay in contact. Once a week, Ivetta visited her father in his apartment and made him dinner. Then, there were the nights when he saw her dance at the restaurant. Her mother, a purist, despised the Russian Riviera, and the idea that her daughter, classically trained and destined for greater things, would degrade herself by dancing there.

Even before Ivetta went home with Kostya, people had started to comment.

To each of them, independently, Volodya said, “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Passing them at the bar, Skinny Zyama said, “Don’t get her pregnant. It will kill my show.”

The night that Ivetta finally went home with Kostya, they left the restaurant in separate cars. Kostya drove ahead in Emil’s van and Ivetta followed in a new Nissan Maxima. In the parking lot, Kostya felt the impulse to apologize for his car and, in the apartment, he wanted to apologize again. Clearly, she was used to better. He hadn’t changed anything in the apartment since Emil had left for Moscow. He had never
belonged in Canada, Emil had told Kostya, and he’d felt, every
day, an exile. A man in his fifties should not come to a strange
land, not knowing the language, absent connections, and
expect to thrive. He had abandoned his homeland because of a
pernicious system, but now that the system had been
overthrown he would return. The borders were open. Russia
was replete with talent. A Russian fighter could now ply his
trade all over the world—in Europe, in America, in Australia.
In Moscow, Emil could restore his reputation.

“Keep everything, including the van,” Emil had said. “The
ministry mails the registration renewal in October. They have
it organized by birth month. Mail them a check and send me a
birthday card.”

Kostya slept on the same mattress that Emil had salvaged
years before from Goodwill. His furniture consisted of a metal-
and-Formica kitchen table, with mismatching pine chairs; a
faded gray velour couch; a coffee table with a scored glass top;
and a large Zenith television set in a wooden console. But
Ivetta didn’t complain. Even as she spent increasingly more
time in the apartment, she never once suggested that Kostya
replace the table or the bed. They settled into a routine:
Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights, after the Russian
Riviera, they drove to the apartment in their separate cars. On
the other nights, Ivetta slept at her mother’s house. When
Ivetta’s mother confronted her, Ivetta fled to Kostya’s
apartment in tears. She threw herself onto his bed and bawled.
She stayed like that for a long time, her back shuddering.
When Kostya laid his hand on her, Ivetta related the painful
details of her argument with Luda. Her mother had said cruel,
shameless things. Ivetta increased her sobbing when she told
him the worst of them.

“At least your father was something before he became
nothing,” Luda had said, “but you, you’re starting with
nothing."
On Saturday, at eight o’clock, in among the arriving guests, Kostya spotted the face of the larger gangster and then that of his smaller companion. Kostya watched them drift from the door to the fountain. At the bar, the larger one settled in to Kostya’s right and his friend took the next seat over. After nodding to Kostya, the larger gangster asked the bartender for two Cognacs, and, when each snifter had been filled, he made no move to pay.

“We’re guests of Zyama Karp’s,” he said.
The bartender glanced at Kostya.
“It’s fine,” Kostya said.
“Where is your boss?” the gangster asked.
“Around,” Kostya said.
“Tell him we’re here.”
Kostya rose from his seat and walked the length of the bar to Skinny Zyama’s office. As he passed the gangsters, he remarked that they were both wearing the same suits as before. The smaller gangster was seated on his barstool with his legs bent, and Kostya could see holes in his socks, exposing white, hairless skin.
Kostya found Zyama standing before a full-length mirror, adjusting his suspenders and straightening his bow tie. His shoes were poised beside his desk and his tuxedo jacket was draped over the back of his admiral’s chair.
Turning from the mirror, Zyama eyed Kostya.
“Fix your tie,” Zyama said.
Kostya fingered the knot of his tie and gave it a superficial tug.
“The gangsters are here,” he said.
“What gangsters?”
“The New Jersey gangsters.”
“What are they doing?”
“Drinking at the bar.”
“Sons of bitches.”
“What do you want me to do?”
“Get rid of them,” Zyama said. “Just don’t make a scene.”
On his way back, Kostya paused to transfer a set of brass
knuckles from his breast pocket to his left trouser pocket.
Typically, he did not carry them. Any problem he could not
solve with his bare fists was likely a problem he could not
solve. But, in this instance, he had brought the brass knuckles
as a limited precaution. He felt their weight against his thigh,
and checked to be sure that their outline was not visible
through the fabric.
At the bar, the larger gangster was smoking a cigarette and
surveying the foyer and the dining room. He watched Kostya’s
approach.
“You told him?” he asked.
“You should finish your drinks and leave,” Kostya said.
“Is that what he said?”
“No. He just said leave.”
“He’s making a big mistake.”
“Someone is,” Kostya said.
“Maybe even you,” the gangster said.
He smiled and remained on his stool, flaunting his ease.
Whatever would happen would not happen just yet, Kostya
sensed. The initial crush of guests were then assembling in the
foyer—a collection of witnesses and complications.
Kostya left the bar and took up his position by the door,
where he oversaw the familiar procession. Moguls in designer
suits—their fortunes amassed in the wake of the Soviet
collapse—parked their Bentleys, BMWs, and Mercedeses and
ascended the steps with their bejewelled wives. Lesser
businessmen and professionals—there to celebrate birthdays
and significant anniversaries—trooped from Hondas and
Toyotas carrying flower arrangements, cake boxes, and bottles of vodka. Amid the disorder of coats, and the near-suffocating fog of rival perfumes and colognes, Kostya spied Ivetta and Ivetta as she would look in twenty years—both Ivettas looked elegant and unhappy. As they neared Kostya, they became more unhappy. With them were an old man and an old woman—Ivette’s grandparents. Her grandfather was clean-shaven, with a full head of white hair. He wore a brown suit and, for his age, moved precisely and energetically. Her grandmother, unlike most women her age, had hair that was neither dyed nor cut. Instead, it was gathered in a gray bun. She wore a colorful shawl over an Oriental-looking dress and held her husband’s arm. When Luda addressed Kostya, the woman waited patiently.

“So you’re him?” Luda said.
Before he could answer, Luda turned to Ivetta.
“Is this him?”
“Yes.”
“Where are your manners? Why don’t you introduce us?”
Painfully, Ivetta made the introductions.
“Mother, Kostya. Kostya, my mother.”
“Why so formal?” Luda asked. “We may be in-laws. We should embrace.”
That said, neither she nor Kostya inclined to embrace.
“Who is he?” Ivetta’s grandfather asked.
“Ivette’s boyfriend,” Luda told him.
“We invited him?” the grandfather asked.
“He works here.”
“Is that so?”
“He’s the doorman,” Luda said.
“The doorman?”
“Yes.”
“Does it pay well?” the grandfather asked.
“All right,” Kostya said.
“Cash?”
“Yes.”
“By the hour?”
“A flat sum for the night.”
“What about tips?” the grandfather asked.
“Not usually.”
“You live in a house or an apartment?”
“An apartment.”
“Where?”
“Antibes.”
“We used to live there. How many bedrooms?”
“One.”
“What do you pay in rent?”
“Seven hundred dollars,” Kostya said.
“Expensive. You should save up, get a house.”

As her family proceeded into the dining room, Ivetta lagged momentarily behind. While he had been answering her grandfather’s questions, Kostya had watched her face darken with hostility. He had seen her look this way before only in relation to her mother, but, at some level, he had always expected that she would one day direct this look at him. A person has only so many faces—the face you show an enemy you will one day show a friend. But knowing this still had not prepared him for the severity of Ivetta’s contempt.

Keeping a sterile distance from him, she said, “How could you do this to me?”

She spoke loudly enough to cause people nearby to turn their heads. In private, Kostya thought that he might have been able to contend with Ivetta’s anger, but in public he felt inhibited by shame.

“I only asked for one thing,” Ivetta said.
“If it was possible, I would have done it,” Kostya said.
“Do you care about me at all?”
“Yes,” Kostya said.
“No. If you cared about me, you would never have let this happen.”

With a cool finality, Ivetta pivoted on her heel and stranded Kostya in the foyer. He watched as she made her way across the floor and into the dining room to join her family. For the first time, he felt a desire to hurt her. He had never done it before, had never hit Ivetta or anyone, man or woman, in anger, but at that instant there was a pressure in his hands and his shoulder blades that wanted release. If he had been asked to describe the pressure, he would have said that it amounted to the phrase, repeated, “Who needs this?” If he had been able to step outside or find a quiet corner, Kostya thought that he could contain the feeling. If he could blind himself to Ivetta’s presence in the dining room, to the people jostling him, to the gangsters at the bar, he could arrive at a solution. Only a few steps and he could be outside, where he could breathe and think. But as he pressed toward the door he saw the larger gangster waving to him, a leer on his square face, and Kostya did not resist.

“That’s some girl,” the gangster said.
Without answering, Kostya reclaimed his seat at the bar.
“A good figure and a temper. The sort that likes it rough. Gets down like a dog, begs to be slapped around.”

The guests were all in the dining room now, sitting down to their excess of appetizers. Soon, the band would start up. Lyona Ostricker would assume the stage and sing Russian classics and then coarsen his voice and do an imitation of a famous black jazz singer. Guests would toast the objects of their celebrations. Bow-tied waiters would deliver the first course. The dance floor would fill and the band would play Russian and American disco.
“This isn’t going to end well,” Kostya said.
“For who?” the gangster asked.
“Good question.”
“It doesn’t have to be this way,” the gangster said.
“It does if you stay,” Kostya said.

At the far end of the dining room, near the stage, Kostya saw Skinny Zyama holding court at his usual table. Guests and acquaintances stopped by to pay their respects. The choreographer, a woman twenty years his junior, kept him company.

“You don’t expect us to leave without seeing the famous show?” the gangster said.

“The show is an hour away,” Kostya said.
“We came this far—we’ll wait,” the gangster said.

Kostya regarded the smaller gangster. He sat coiled and seething, his eyes feverish. For the duration of the hour, until the show began, he held the same position. But when the lights dimmed, the dance floor cleared, and the prelude for the spectacle began, he started to shift in his chair. And when the dancers—Ivetta included—assumed the stage for the “Fiddler on the Roof” number, the smaller gangster lowered himself from his seat and made for the men’s room. Without a word, the larger gangster followed.

The floor show normally lasted half an hour. The intermittent changes the choreographer imposed never altered its length. After “Fiddler on the Roof,” there was a number in which the dancers leaped across the stage dressed like cats; then there was a scene from “Swan Lake”; then a song called “Cabaret,” for which Ivetta was the lead. Kostya had seen this incarnation of the show at least thirty times and had memorized its rhythms to the extent that he could hear the words and visualize the steps before they were executed. And he knew that after the end of “Fiddler on the Roof” there
remained more than twenty minutes in the show.

Quietly, suppressing the desire to hurry, Kostya crossed the length of the foyer to the men’s room. On the way, he placed his left hand in his pocket and slipped his fingers into the brass knuckles. With his other hand he pushed open the heavy men’s-room door. To the right were eight tall porcelain urinals. To the left was a long expanse of black marble floor and six white marble basins on nickel pedestals. The walls were covered with gilt-framed mirrors, and by the door were two brass tubs—one filled with fresh linen towels and the other with a pile of the same towels, already soiled. Opposite the basins were four ceiling-high toilet stalls—slabs of black marble with nickel-plated doors. The room was spotless and silent. Kostya listened for some indication of the gangsters. Then, using his knee, he tested the stall doors. The first two swung open, but the third held fast. At the disturbance, a voice belonging to the larger gangster said, “Occupied.” Kostya jostled the door again.

“Fuck off,” the gangster said.

Gauging his distance, Kostya reared back and slammed his heel against the door. The bolt gave way, and the door flung inward to reveal the two gangsters. The smaller one was seated on the toilet, and the larger gangster squatted in front of him. It took Kostya a moment to decipher what they were doing. The smaller gangster had his jacket off and one of his shirtsleeves rolled up. A belt was cinched at his biceps and a syringe protruded from his forearm. From what Kostya could tell, the man did not look conscious.

From his position on the floor, the larger gangster gave Kostya a look of animal hatred.

“My brother is sick,” he said.

An instant later, he sprang up. Kostya moved reflexively, slipped to his left, shifted his weight, and threw an uppercut
that caught the gangster’s jaw. He felt the force of the blow through the brass knuckles and into his shoulder. He could not remember when he had hit anyone as hard, and he felt a shiver of pleasure descend through his knees. The gangster tottered to one side, bumped against the stall, and then pitched backward onto the floor. There was blood on his face and shirt collar and a spreading pool, oily black, on the dark surface of the marble.

For a time, the only sound in the room was breathing. Kostya heard his own, the rasping of the beaten gangster, and the slow, nasal exhalations of the smaller gangster, slumped against the toilet tank. Kostya tried to settle his pulse and clear his mind. Both men were breathing; they would live. Kostya had contained the mess to the bathroom, and if he acted quickly he could summon Skinny Zyama, remove the gangsters, and clean up without disturbing the guests. Nobody could accuse him of having failed to do his job, but Kostya derived little contentment from this. The job was something he no longer wanted. The thought of pleasing Skinny Zyama or of sitting at the bar to watch Ivetta dance another night seemed unendurable. It occurred to Kostya that he could leave the gangsters to be discovered by Skinny Zyama or someone else. He could walk away. While the show was still on, he could leave without attracting attention. He could find another apartment and another job no worse than this one. It did not need to be difficult.

Kostya took a moment to compose himself. He examined his hands and saw blood. But before he could consult the mirror he heard movement at the men’s-room door. Kostya blocked it with his foot.

“Busy cleaning. Use the women’s room,” he said.

“The hell I will,” the man replied, and kept pushing.

Kostya slipped his fingers back into the brass knuckles before he released the door and Ivetta’s grandfather forced his
way in.

“There’s been an accident,” Kostya said.
“I can see that,” Ivetta’s grandfather said.
The old man bent and examined the gangster’s broken face.
“It only looks bad,” Kostya said.
“I was at the front. I’ve seen bad.”
He walked over to the smaller gangster and placed a hand on his chest.
“Still beating,” the grandfather said.
The old man then stepped into the neighboring stall and urinated. When he’d finished, he moistened a towel in the sink and handed it to Kostya.
“There’s blood on your face,” the old man said.
“It’s his,” Kostya said.
“He needs an ambulance,” the old man said.
“If you think so,” Kostya said.
The music for the “Cabaret” song flowed into the washroom when the old man opened the door. As the door swung shut, Kostya’s thoughts turned to his own grandfather. He had died when Kostya was still young, but Kostya could recall sitting with him as he related stories of the Great Patriotic War. A German grenade had taken three fingers off his left hand. On the back of the hand he had the date and place of the battle tattooed in green ink. At that time, reminders of the war were everywhere. There were tributes and parades to honor the veterans. Movie theatres showed documentaries and heroic epics. In the streets and back lots, Kostya pretended with his friends that they were the Red Army on the attack. To cries of “Forward, Comrades!,” they rose from culverts and trenches and charged across the steppe, rifles pointed, greatcoats flapping. Kostya hadn’t thought about any of this in years.

Distracted, Kostya failed to notice that the smaller gangster
had begun to stir until the man half-raised himself from the toilet and blinked somnolently.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“The Russian Riviera,” Kostya replied.

He watched with a measure of sympathetic curiosity as the gangster’s eyes scanned the room, absorbing the details: the broken door, the blood, his brother’s disfigured face. Kostya expected the gangster to collapse again momentarily. He stood with his arms spread in the stall, his elbows locked, his torso canted forward. He looked like a fighter who had got up when he should have stayed down, whose pride and courage would be rewarded only with a harsher beating. He lifted his eyes to Kostya, as if seeing him for the first time.

“How did I get here?” the gangster asked.

“I don’t know,” Kostya said.

“How do I get out of here?”

“I don’t know that either.” ♦

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